

アルスラーン戦記①

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王都炎上

田中芳樹





王都炎上



ルシタニア騎士のひとりが^{駆け}毛の馬を^{躍ら}せた。二条の雷光が^{すれ}ちがう。
——ダリューンの槍は相手の咽喉を^貫そ^くいた。(アトロバテネの会戦)

One of the Lusitanians leapt upon a dapple gray horse. Like two streaks of lightning crossing paths — Dariun's lance pierced through his opponent's throat. (The Battle of Atropatene, iv)



Farangis shut her eyes and placed a thin little crystal flute at her lips. Giv gazed enchanted at her face: bathed in the light of the half moon, as white as Serican porcelain. (Beasts and Beauties, v)

Chapter 1: The Battle of Atropatene

1. The Battle of Atropatene (i)

The sun should have long ago risen, but through the shroud of fog blanketing the plains, not a single ray of light could penetrate. It was, after all, right in the middle of the tenth month, when the autumnal sun grew ever weaker. Nor was there the slightest hint of wind. Indeed, it was a most uncommon sight for the usual climes of Pars — fog so thick that it did not seem it would disperse any time soon.

Arslan, the son of King Andragoras III of Pars, gently patted his uneasy mount. As this was his first time participating in battle, Arslan was somewhat nervous himself. However, he understood that if he did not keep his horse calm, he would be unable to act at all when the time came.

That being said, just what on earth was this fog? The slow roll of plains stretching on and on into the distance, the sharp rise of snow-covered peaks to the far north: all was concealed, no longer visible to the eye.

Hoofbeats sounded from the right, materializing into an elderly knight in full armor. It was Eran¹ Vahriz of Pars. Though he was already sixty-five years of age, his body was honed from long years of riding to war or to the hunt.

“So that’s where you ran off to, Your Highness. Don’t wander too far from His Majesty’s main battalion, now. It’s no joke getting lost under conditions like this.”

“Vahriz, is this fog not disadvantageous to our troops?” Arslan asked the old knight. Under his helm, the prince’s luminous eyes flashed dark as the clear night sky.

“Whether fog or darkness of night,” replied Vahriz, laughing, “or even a great blizzard — nothing can halt the advance of the horsemen of Pars.

¹ Commander-in-Chief

Please, do not trouble yourself, Your Highness. Ever since your father the king took the throne, the armies of Pars have known no defeat!”

But the fourteen-year-old prince was unable to accept such heedless confidence from his elder. Had not the old man just warned him of the dangers of getting lost? With their pace slowed down by this thick fog, were not the very strengths of the cavalry now hampered?

“Come now, you’re fretting even more than an old geezer like me! All 85,000 of our cavalrymen know the terrain of Atropatene like the backs of their hands. Those Lusitanian barbarians, on the other hand, hail from more than 400 farsangs² away. They don’t know the lay of the land at all. They’ve basically come all this way to some distant foreign country just to dig their own graves!”

Arslan brushed his fingers against the hilt of the shortsword at his waist. Then he stopped and said, “Not long ago, the Kingdom of Maryam was destroyed by the Lusitanians. To the Lusitanians, was not Maryam also a distant foreign country?”

Just as the old man was about to unleash a rebuttal to his overly pedantic prince, another knight emerged from the murk and called out.

“Eran Vahriz! Please hurry back to the main battalion!”

“Are we preparing to sortie then, Lord Qaran?”

The middle-aged knight shook his head. The red tassel on his helmet jerked with the movement. “No, it’s your nephew. There’s trouble.”

“Dariun?”

“Yes. His Majesty the king is furious. He’s saying he’ll strip Dariun of his command. But Lord Dariun is one of our kingdom’s finest heroes...”

² ~2000 km

“*Marde-e mardan*. A man among men. I know.”

“It’ll affect the troops’ morale if something like this really happens just as we’re about to deploy. Eran, please! You must placate His Majesty somehow!”

“What a pain in the ass he is, that Dariun!” Although the old man was indeed angered, his words belied the boundless depths of affection he held for his nephew.

Following Qaran’s lead, Arslan and Vahriz urged their horses into a gallop across the plains, through the shadowy fog.

Shah Andragoras III of Pars was forty-four years of age. His profuse black beard and razor-sharp gaze bespoke of the brimming vigor of a general who had gone sixteen years without a single defeat. He stood as tall as a horse, with a tiger’s shoulders and a bear’s waist. At thirteen he had defeated a lion single-handedly, earning the title of Shergir, “Lion-Hunter”; by fourteen, he had participated in his first battle and become Mardan, a full-fledged warrior. He was a man most suited to commanding the vast forces of Pars: 125,000 horsemen and 300,000 footsoldiers in all.

Said king was currently located in a luxurious silk tent in the main encampment, trembling with anger. A single armored young man knelt before him. This man was Eran Vahriz’s nephew Dariun, who was, at twenty-seven years of age, the youngest of the only twelve Marzbans in the entire army.

A marzban was a general with ten thousand mounted warriors under his command. In Pars, the cavalry had always been venerated over the infantry. All cavalry officers were of the knighted *azadan* caste, while their subordinates were *azat* freemen; on the other hand, even infantry officers were mere *azat*, while the rest were but *ghulam*, or slaves. Under the military hierarchy, a marzban was essentially second only to *wispuhran*, the royalty. For Dariun to have reached the rank of Marzban at a mere twenty-seven, one could easily imagine just what a bold figure he must be.

“Dariun, truly have I been mistaken in you!” roared the king, striking the tent pole with a whip. “You whose reputation thunders as far as Turan and Misr! Have you been possessed by a coward’s ghost? To think that I would hear the word ‘retreat’ from the likes of you, when the battle has not even begun!”

At this, Dariun spoke up at last. “Your Majesty. It is not out of cowardice that I humbly advise you thus.”

He was dressed entirely in black: from the tassel of his helm to his armor and boots, all but for the lining of his mantle, which was the color of a crimson sunset. With his youthful, sun-darkened face and keen, intense expression, one might even consider him handsome, were it not for the fact that armor suited him far more than silk and jewels.

“A warrior fleeing from battle, refusing to fight — if this is not cowardice, then what is it?”

“Sire, please think this over. The ferocity and strength of the horsemen of Pars are known far and wide. For what reason, then, has the Lusitanian army deployed upon the plains, deliberately lying in wait for our troops, when the terrain is clearly to our advantage?

The king fell silent.

“I believe it must be a trap. In such a thick fog, we cannot even be certain of our own allies’ movements. With all due respect, I was suggesting that the troops be pulled back before redeploying closer to the capital at Ecbatana. I did not mean to suggest that we withdraw entirely from the battlefield. In what way is this an act of cowardice?”

With a cruel sneer, Andragoras said, “Dariun. Since when did your tongue grow sharper than your arrows and your blade? How could those Lusitanian bastards possibly set up a trap in unfamiliar terrain?”

“That, I confess, I do not know. However, if some of our own people are among the Lusitanian troops, then we can no longer assume that they are entirely unfamiliar with the surrounding topography.”

The king glared at the young warrior. “Are you saying that our people are aiding those barbarians? Impossible!”

“On the contrary, sire. I understand that it may be difficult to accept, but it is a definite possibility. If a few mistreated slaves were to escape, seeking vengeance, they might very well choose to render assistance to the Lusitanians.”

The king’s whip suddenly flew out and struck Dariun’s breastplate. “Slaves? What of them? Or is it that you’ve fallen under the spell of that Narses’s ridiculous teachings now? Have you already forgotten that he’s been expelled from court and forbidden any contact whatsoever with my ministers or generals?”

“I have not forgotten, sire. I have neither seen nor spoken to Narses in these past three years. Though it is true he is my friend...”

“You call that lunatic your friend? Well said!” said the king through clenched teeth. It seemed as if his fury were about to erupt from every pore of his body. He tossed away his whip and drew the jeweled sword girdled at his waist. The more timid individuals among the gathered bystanders cried out in shock. All those present thought for sure that Dariun’s life was forfeit. But the king had not yet lost his senses entirely. Instead, he stretched his sword out to Dariun’s heart. Then, with the tip of his blade, he ripped away the small gold medal hanging there upon Dariun’s breastplate. This medal was in the shape of a lion’s head. Only the Eran and the Marzbans were allowed to wear it, as a sign of their prestige.

“I hereby dismiss you from your post as Marzban! Although I shall allow you to retain your status as Mardan and Shergir, consider this a lesson to you!”

Dariun said nothing and allowed his gaze to fall to the carpet. But the wavering glint of his pauldrons betrayed the slightest tremble of his encased shoulders within. It was the only hint of his anger at this unjust sulling of his name.

Meanwhile, Andragoras sheathed his sword once more and raised a quivering finger to the tent's entrance.

“Now go! Get out of my sight!”

Dariun had not even moved from his spot when three shadows fell across the entrance. Right in the path of the king’s pointing finger stood Prince Arslan himself.

1. The Battle of Atropatene (ii)

Upon noting the arrival of the prince and the Eran, King Andragoras’s expression grew even nastier. He knew exactly why his own son and his most valued retainer had come here in such a rush.

“My lord father...”

Arslan’s voice was instantly overpowered by one ten times its volume.

“What the hell are you doing here when I haven’t even called for you? This is no time for you to be poking your nose into other people’s business. Think of your own measly record! Now scram!”

Faced with words that closer resembled outright dismissal than true reprimand, Arslan could not help but give rise to feelings of resentment. Though what the king had said was not wrong, Arslan could not comprehend why his lord father insisted on treating him with such an attitude. In contrast, the king treated Arslan’s mother Queen Tahmineh with such warmth and tenderness, one could almost say he doted on her.

Twelve Marzbans in all served under Shah Andragoras III and Eran Vahriz in the armies of Pars. These twelve were named Saam, Qobad, Shapur, Garshasp, Qaran, Keshvad, Manuchehr, Bahman, Khwarshed, Kurup, Hayir, and Dariun. Among them, Keshvad and Bahman were stationed at the eastern border, Saam and Garshasp guarded the capital Ecbatana, and the remaining eight prepared to do battle alongside their king and the Eran at Atropatene. Each of these eight Marzbans commanded ten thousand horsemen. Including the king’s personal guard, the five thousand Athanatoi

“Immortals”, the cavalry totaled 85,000 in all. All these men in addition to the infantry were currently arrayed upon the hazy plains.

As the crown prince, Arslan was in a position to someday take over command of these men as Shah. However, position and actual power were two different matters. At the moment, he was little more than a lowly officer who had been assigned a mere hundred cavalrymen. Of course, seeing as how this was his first time in battle, commanding even this number of subordinates would be no easy task. In fact, it was probably more accurate to consider those men his supervisors rather than his subordinates. *Regardless, Father could at least allow me to voice my own opinions...* So thought Arslan within his heart.

Vahriz, seeing that Arslan was at a loss for words, stepped forward in his place. But rather than speaking, he chose instead to take action. He strode over to his nephew. Then, suddenly, he raised his hand and smacked Dariun firmly in the face.

“You insolent little brat! Do you not realize your own position? How dare you talk back to your king!”

“Sir, I...”

Dariun had only just opened his mouth to speak when he received another slap. Left with no further recourse, he heaved a great sigh and turned to the king, wordlessly lowering his head to the floor. Eran Vahriz knelt and bowed to the king as well.

“Your Majesty, allow this sack of old bones to beg your pardon in place of his foolish nephew. Please, have mercy! Forgive your old servant’s nephew for his transgressions!”

“That’s enough, Vahriz.”

Though the king spoke thus, his displeasure was made clear in his tone and expression. He had seen through the old man, and realized that the harsh rebuke of his nephew was actually a clever stratagem to protect him while allowing King Andragoras room to back down without losing face. Had the

two parties' mutual disgruntlement otherwise been allowed to continue causing friction under these circumstances, the scene might well have ended in an irreversible rift.

“Dariun!” King Andragoras addressed the young knight kneeling before him in a voice still brimming with wrath. “The dismissal from your post still stands! However, I shall give you a chance to recover your position! Should you perform well in the coming battle in the station of a regular cavalryman, I'll take your record into account when I decide how to deal with you!”

“My lord is merciful. Thy servant is grateful,” said Dariun, clearly struggling for an appropriate response.

The king did not even bother to spare him a glance. Instead, he turned his cold gaze onto Arslan, who was standing awkwardly to the side.

“What are you still doing here?”

“Rest assured, Father. We shall leave at once.”

Having spoken thus, Arslan immediately exited the tent. Certainly his father the king was in a bad mood, but Arslan himself harbored discontent as well. It was more than obvious that King Andragoras had taken Vahriz's feelings into consideration. But to his own son and heir, could he not display even the slightest bit of civility?

A rather contrite-looking Dariun caught up to them from behind.

“Please forgive me for causing Your Highness such trouble.”

“It's fine. After all, what you said was not wrong, was it?”

“Yes, and Lord Qaran agrees with me as well. It is not my intention to push blame on another, but it was in fact he who first proposed that we speak our minds to the king.”

Arslan nodded, but his interest had already transferred to a different figure, one who was not currently present at all.

“Dariun, what kind of a person was Narses?”

“I counted him as a friend. To my knowledge, there exists no other man so wise as he.”

“What nonsense! A perverse, peculiar fellow, he was,” countered the Eran then with a single gibe.

With a spark of challenge in his eye, Dariun replied, “Uncle, did you not once claim yourself that Narses was the finest strategist in the entire kingdom? Or was that nonsense as well?”

“I speak of defects of personality, not defects of the mind.”

Watching the squabbling pair, Arslan could not help but feel a tinge of envy. It occurred to him suddenly what a happy thing it would be, if only he and his father could converse like this. With such passion and frankness. Feeling that he could not interpose himself between uncle and nephew any longer, Arslan turned his horse away.

The Eran bowed toward the prince’s departing back before continuing to berate his nephew. “Dariun, even if you wish to petition the king, you should choose your time wisely, you know? His Majesty finally acknowledged your talent and achievements and promoted you to Marzban. Yet now, with a single act, you’ve destroyed it all. Was it really worth it?”

“Yes, I know. There is a proper time for making petitions. But if I had waited until after we lost the battle, it would have been too late.”

With his king and his prince, Dariun had naturally held back. But with his own uncle, he had no such compunctions.

“Sir, I have no faith that I will even survive this battle! I am not so incredible that I’d be able to return as a ghost just to present my entreaties —”

The old but still quite robust Eran could not help but snort. “Don’t you spout such irritating nonsense. That Narses was the same. The moment he was convinced he was in the right, all restraint was gone. Nothing but blather from his mouth.”

Dariun had been about to say something else, but upon realizing that whatever he said would only be met by more digs from his uncle, he kept his silence.

The old man quickly changed the topic.

“Dariun, it’s been sixteen years now since I took on the mantle of Eran.”

“You were already Marzban when I was born.”

“Indeed! It’s certainly been a long time. Look, my beard’s already turned white.”

“But you still have a fine set of lungs!”

“What a cheeky brat you are! Oh, forget it. It’s about time for me to make way for the younger generation anyway.”

Dariun blinked.

Upon seeing his nephew’s confusion, the old man said, in a brisk but measured tone, “You shall be the next Eran of the Kingdom of Pars. I informed the queen of my wishes before we set off from the capital.”

Dariun stared at his uncle in shock. “I appreciate your efforts, sir, but any decision regarding such matters is entirely at the behest of His Majesty the king. Not to mention the incident just now... Uncle, no matter what you say, there is simply no way the king will heed you now.”

“What are you talking about? Of course he’ll take heed. He’s well aware of your ability.”

The old man gave a slight yawn.

“Ah, that’s right, Dariun.”

“Hm?” Dariun leaned forward unconsciously in anticipation of what his uncle would say next.

“I’ve been observing Prince Arslan for quite a while now. What do you think of his looks?”

“Well, he has grown quite comely, I should think. In another two or three years, all the young noblewomen of the capital will be fighting tooth and claw over him. But, sir, why...”

“Who do you think His Highness takes after? The king or the queen?”

Dariun found himself perplexed at his uncle’s query. Surely neither beauty nor lack of it was an absolutely vital, indispensable quality in a ruler. So why was his uncle so concerned over such a detail?

“If you’re seriously asking, I suppose he takes more after the queen!”

To be more precise, it was not so much that the boy resembled the queen as it was that he *didn’t* resemble his father King Andragoras III. But as a mere vassal, that was hardly something Dariun could voice out loud.

“As I thought, he doesn’t take after His Majesty,” replied the Eran, nodding as if he had read his nephew’s mind. Indeed, were the boy to take after his father the king, the lines of his face would have to be rougher, sturdier, filled with more ferocity and vigor. The Eran continued, “Dariun, may I ask you to declare your loyalty to His Highness Arslan?”

The young warrior who had been, until just recently, a high-ranking officer in command of ten thousand men, looked back at his uncle

incredulously. With such an important battle looming ahead, his uncle's attitude was simply inexplicable.

"I have already pledged my loyalty to the royal family of Pars. And now you want me to swear an oath..."

"I mean to His Highness himself, Dariun."

"I understand. If that is what you wish, Uncle..."

"Swear upon your sword?"

"I swear upon my sword!"

Having thus sworn, Dariun's stoic expression spread into a thin, wry smile. He felt that his uncle had been a little too insistent regarding this matter. "Perhaps you would like me to sign a written pledge for you now, sir?"

"No, the oath was enough."

On Vahriz's face there was not the slightest hint of mirth. On the contrary, he wore an expression of keen intent and spoke with the utmost solemnity. Upon seeing this, Dariun was forced to relinquish his mordant mood.

"All I want is for you to serve as Prince Arslan's companion. After all, not even a thousand cavalrymen can match up to one of you."

"Sir..." Dariun could not help but raise his voice. If such was his beloved uncle's wish, then naturally, he would accept it. However, that did not keep him from expressing his misgivings.

Just at that moment, a horn sounded, piercing through the thick fog to their very ears. The battle had begun. With an easy grace that belied his age, Vahriz spurred his horse toward the main column, and Dariun lost his chance to uncover his uncle's true motives.



1. The Battle of Atropatene (iii)

King Andragoras strode out of his tent, mounted his horse, and rode straight to the head of the main column. In what other land could one find such a dignified and charismatic king? The retainers at his side could not resist such prideful thinking. He was the king of the great nation of Pars, a fierce and undefeated general, a ruler who struck awe even in the lords and kings of neighboring countries.

Vahriz bowed deeply and proceeded to relay his report.

“85,000 cavalrymen and 138,000 infantrymen, all ready to deploy!”

“What of the enemy’s numbers?”

The elderly Eran summoned Qaran, the Marzban in charge of all investigations.

Qaran respectfully answered the king’s question. “According to my analysis, I estimate 25,000 to 30,000 enemy cavalrymen and 80,000 to 90,000 footsoldiers. They deployed roughly the same numbers in Maryam.”

“After a long string of battles, their numbers should have lessened, no?”

“Or they may have been bolstered by reinforcements from home.”

At those words, the king nodded, but not without some amount of reluctance. He had been hoping for more precise, solid data. It had been Qaran himself who volunteered to spearhead the investigations, and it was true he had the requisite ability for it. For that reason the king had allowed him to assume all responsibility for their investigative efforts. And yet now Qaran, who was normally even more fastidious and prudent than Dariun or Vahriz, behaved with such assertiveness before his king.

“That being said, under these conditions we cannot determine the enemy’s exact formations.”

“Please do not trouble yourself, sire. Likewise, the enemy cannot make out our formations either. As long as we outnumber them two to one, victory shall definitely be ours.”

Qaran spoke with such force and conviction that King Andragoras nodded in agreement. Vahriz, who had stopped his mount twenty gaz³ away, threw a worried glance in their direction, but not a word of their furtive exchange reached the old man’s ears.

“Enemies sighted!”

The cry passed down through the ranks until it reached the main column. The rider who had sounded the alert whipped his horse forward to give his report. There was movement on the enemies’ frontline eight amaj⁴ ahead.

“Before us lie the slopes of Mount Bashur, where the spirit of Hero King Kai Khosrow stands guard. Nor are there any faults or depressions in the area. No matter how thick the fog, there shouldn’t be any problems as long as our horses charge on straight ahead.”

Upon Qaran’s declaration, King Andragoras’s face immediately broke out into an expression of smug delight. He had always been an audacious, militant sort of general, more likely to reject the cautious considerations of one like Dariun while favoring a more aggressive strategy. This kind of ferocious direct attack had been his desire to begin with. On the other hand, if Dariun were currently present, he would have probably given rise to the uneasy suspicion that Qaran was deliberately inciting the king to action.

The wind fluttered. The fog rolled. A lucky omen, thought Arslan. If the fog were dispersed by the wind, the vast plains of Atropatene would become visible again. The horsemen, the main force of their great army, would then be at an advantage again.

³ ~20 m

⁴ ~2000 m

But the fog remained heavy as ever. It shifted slightly with the breeze, but did not drift away from the plains. At the rear of the main column, alone and bereft of any command, rode Dariun. The image of black armor shadowed against a sea of white lingered in Arslan's mind.

King Andragoras's resonant voice pierced through the veil of fog.

"Oh, great kings of Pars! Sage King Jamshid, Hero King Kai Khosrow, and the spirits of all my forebears! May you guide and protect us!"

"May you guide and protect us!"

The riders of the main column joined their voices to the king's. Their shouts rippled out to even the farthest of the Parsian troops. The king raised his brawny right arm and thrust downward in a forceful gesture. With a great cry, the armies of Pars began their attack.

80,000 cavalrymen charged forward. Their thundering hoofbeats shook the very earth.

The fog flowed past the galloping riders. Their armor rang with the sound of impact; the swords and spears girded at their sides glittered with moisture.

The sight of this cavalry charge was one that had always struck fear into the hearts of the enemies of Pars. Before the onslaught of Parsian swords and spears, enemy troops were mowed down like grass. Even the fog could not suppress the rumble of hoofbeats; rather, the concealment of their approaching figures only served to heighten the sense of impending doom.

Knowing this to be the case, the Parsian troops saw only victory beyond the fog. Faster and faster they charged, spurred on by this illusion. Suddenly, the riders on the frontline realized that the ground beneath their feet had disappeared. With a helpless shout, they pulled back on their reins, but it was already too late. They hurtled off a cliff into empty space and fell.

The first line of riders was pressed onward by the second line. The second was pressed onward by the third. The screams of horses contested with the terrified cries of men.

A huge fissure gaped before them. It was the largest fault running through Atropatene, measuring one farsang⁵ in length, thirty gaz⁶ in width, and up to five gaz deep. Just like that, this naturally formed ditch felled the hardy riders of Pars, sending them into a mud-spattered heap. Those who had fallen whimpered in pain from broken bones, only for new victims to fall from above, further crushing them. Panic enveloped the Parsian troops. Then those few who had managed to find their feet again smelled a strange odor. As they identified the viscous substance drenching their kness, dread seized their hearts.

“Watch out! It’s oil! They’re planning to use fire on us!”

They had not even finished shouting their warning when a wall of flame scorched through the air. Fire arrows. Oil that had been spread across the plains beforehand blazed to life all at once, swallowing the Parsian troops.

Hundreds of blazing rings swept through the fog, each one surrounding hundreds of Parsian riders. The movements of over 80,000 cavalrymen had been checked; their unity, divided. The rings of fire pierced through the gloom, clearly illuminating the positions of the Parsians to the watching Lusitanians. All of this, in the blink of an eye.

“Whoa! Whoa!”

The Parsians frantically tried to still their frightened, bucking mounts. Then, amid the shrill neighs of horses, the echo of confused hoofbeats, and the angry cries of riders, a new noise joined the fray.

The whistle of arrows raining down from the sky.

⁵ ~5 km

⁶ ~30 m

The Parsian officers shouted for retreat. Unfortunately, it was impossible to carry out their command. Before them, a wall of flame over one farsang long blocked their advance. In the remaining three directions, endless rings of fire prevented their flight. And from the fiery wall echoed the screams of men and horses being burned alive.

The Lusitanians had even prepared hundreds of siege towers, each roughly the height of five men. From atop the towers they aimed a constant barrage of arrows at the rings of fire. For the Lusitanians, shooting down their trapped and floundering opponents was little more than a game. As this one-sided slaughter continued to unfold, the blazing, blood-drenched bodies of Parsians soon covered the ground like weeds.

However, not long afterward, a fraction of Parsian riders broke through the curtain of fire and smoke, emerging before the Lusitanian troops. Either way, only death awaited... With this realization, the men transformed thought to action, summoned all their pride and skill as equestrians, and leaped over the flaming wall. Those who failed fell right into the waiting fire and disappeared in a mass of flame. Of those who survived the leap, most suffered severe burns. And though many horses and riders were swallowed by the blaze, just as many were felled by sheer exhaustion.

Once unrivaled in all the land, the Parsian horsemen fell to the ground in wave after wave, like an army of clay dolls toppled by a storm. The lives of thousands, the pride of thousands, the legacy of an entire nation: beneath the rain of arrows, amid the endless white fog, all soon would return to dust.

Arslan patted away the little flames licking at his sleeves and mantle, choking on the smoke as he called out, “Father! Dariun! Vahriz!”

There was no response.

The Parsians who had escaped their fiery net drew their swords once more, beating out the flames on their mantles as they surged forward to meet the Lusitanian cavalry.

This violent charge engendered an inevitable reaction in the enemy. In terms of both equestrian skill and mounted swordplay, the Parsians far surpassed the Lusitanians. One by one, the Lusitanians were cut down, their blood soaking the blades of the Parsian riders, their corpses piling into burial shrouds for fallen Parsians.

“What terrifying strength! If we’d taken them on head-to-head, we wouldn’t have stood a chance,” muttered the Lusitanian general Monferrat, as he waited with his troops behind three layers of ditches and fortifications. Beside him, General Baudouin nodded in agreement. With the vague, chilly expressions that flickered across their faces, they did not look at all like men expecting an inevitable victory.

The bodies of Parsian riders continued to pile up before their eyes, one after another. The Lusitanians scattered before the Parsians, who slew and slew all the way to the waiting enemy troops. But they were unable to pass the three layers of fortifications. Meanwhile, the Lusitanians continued to rain down arrows from atop their siege towers. Man and horse alike tumbled to the ground and expired.

Just as the accumulating corpses threatened to spill over the fortifications, the high notes of a Lusitanian trumpet resounded through the air. It was the signal for a counterattack. The gates of fortifications opened. From within poured forth the main force of the Lusitanian troops, still fresh and uninjured, rushing toward the plains in a flood of armor.

“Where’s that damned Qaran!” roared King Andragoras, his face contorting with fury. On the battlefield Andragoras had always brimmed with fearless confidence. This was a quality that had not changed since his days as Eran under the previous king, during the campaign against Badakhshan. And yet today, for the very first time, his valor had taken a great blow. It was precisely because he had never before known loss that he was so afraid now.

At the king’s bellow, one of the thousand-rider captains who served under Qaran’s banner raised his head. He had been stationed with the main

column in order to keep the communications between the king and Qaran confidential.

“T-the Marzban has not been seen for some time now. We’ve been searching for him, but...”

“When you’ve found him, bring him to me at once! Until you have, don’t let me see your face again!”

“... At your will!”

Cringing at the king’s fury, the captain immediately spurred his beloved horse away. As Andragoras watched the captain leave, he let out a low, frustrated groan. It was Qaran who had reported smooth terrain ahead and pushed for an all-out attack. It was because of his advice that this disaster had unfolded.

“That bastard Qaran. Has he betrayed us?”

Vahriz heard the king’s doubtful muttering, but did not respond. Instead, he turned his mount and rode to the other end of the column. There, Dariun looked over his shoulder. His lance lay across the pommel of his saddle. Upon it, his hand rested with a slight tremble.

“Now’s your time, Dariun.”

The Eran gently squeezed his nephew’s arm.

“I shall protect His Majesty the king. You must search for Prince Arslan.”

“The prince...?”

“He was at the front. I fear for him. Perhaps it is already too late. Even so, you must find and protect him. I will stay here and bear the consequences.”

“Understood, sir. Let’s meet again at Ecbatana!”

Dariun bowed, then directed his black horse away with a light pat on its neck. The elderly Eran gazed on, motionless, as his nephew vanished into the thick curtain of fog beyond.

1. The Battle of Atropatene (iv)

Through the fog coursed the flash of blades and spears, like lightning piercing through the clouds of a summer storm. Everywhere whirled the bright red of riotous flame. Heat blasted past, stinking of char.

The young knight in black could not help but question whether he were brave or just reckless — searching for a single boy amid this vast, chaotic battlefield.

“Arslan, Your Highness! Where are you!?”

After shouting time and time again, Dariun’s black armor was now spattered with the blood of countless Lusitanians. He could not remember how many enemy soldiers had met their ends at his spear since he left the king’s column. He knew only that in all three directions, none now stood before him.

He continued to sweep his gaze from left to right, then focused upon a single point. About a hundred gaz⁷ ahead, he had spotted a familiar face. Marzban Qaran. On this face, however, was an expression he had never seen before.

Upon seeing Dariun draw near, Qaran silently raised his hand. The riders around him pointed their spears at Dariun. Dariun realized that they were not men of Pars, but of Lusitania.

“What is the meaning of this, Lord Qaran?”

Despite voicing the question, Dariun had already read the answer in Qaran’s face. Qaran had not confused the enemies’ troops with his own.

⁷ ~100 m

Nor had he gone mad. Dariun knew very well that Qaran had just knowingly and deliberately roused the Lusitanians to action.

He took a deep breath, then spat, “You’ve turned traitor, Qaran?!”

“It is not treachery. If you truly care for Pars, you should join us in removing Andragoras from the throne.”

Qaran had not given the king his due respect, but rather, referred to him by name alone. Dariun’s eyes flashed with understanding as he growled, “Is that so? I see now. That’s why you wanted me to address His Majesty before the battle. So that I would incur His Majesty’s displeasure and lose my position as Marzban — that’s what you were hoping for, wasn’t it?”

Qaran replied with a high laugh. “That’s right, Dariun. You’re no mindless brute. How could I possibly let you remain in command of ten thousand cavalrymen? After all, no matter how fierce of a warrior you are, there is no way for a single man to affect the flow of battle by himself.”

Having gloated thus over his success, Qaran changed tacks and stilled his tongue. Dariun raised his spear and spurred his black mount forward.

One of the Lusitanians at Qaran’s side leapt upon a dapple gray horse to meet the charge. He raised his own lance — which, unlike the Parsian equivalent, had a raised vamplate in the middle to protect his hand — and thrust toward Dariun.

Like two streaks of lightning crossing paths, the Lusitanian’s lance glanced off Dariun’s armor into empty space while Dariun’s pierced through his opponent’s throat. The tip flew out the back of the man’s head. He toppled to the ground, the spear still impaled through his body.

At this point, Dariun had already drawn his sword. The blade gleamed white, like the first light of a winter’s dawn, drawing ribbons of blood from the next rider’s helmeted head.

“Stop right there, Qaran!”

Dariun cut down a third enemy rider. With his following strike, he sent a fourth flying from his saddle in a spray of blood. Before Dariun's swordsmanship, the mighty Lusitanians who had sent the kingdom of Maryam up in flames were little more than helpless infants. One after another, riderless horses fled wildly into the fog.

"Betraying His Majesty, deceiving me. A crime twofold, for which you shall now pay!"

The black horse, responding to its rider's fury, screamed and charged straight toward Qaran.

Even now the remaining Lusitanians intended to halt Dariun's charge. An admirable sentiment; however, their courage cost them their lives. Dariun's charge was swift and unrelenting. Before Qaran the light of crossing blades flickered. The intense clash of metal rang through the air. Brilliant blood spilled across the earth. And now Qaran himself appeared before Dariun's eyes. Between him and Dariun there was no longer even the shadow of a single person. Nothing but a bloodstained sword slicing down from above.

Qaran too was a seasoned warrior, but Dariun's valor had far surpassed his expectations, and perhaps his own guilty conscience had shaken him as well. For suddenly, he turned his horse and fled. Dariun's sword met empty space.

Through the swirling fog raced the two riders. He who had betrayed his king and yet remained safely ensconced as Marzban; he whose loyalty had cost him his position. They traversed the patch of plains like a pair of tangled threads. Even as he fled, Qaran fought back, exchanging around ten rounds of blows with his pursuer. But there was no one who could counter Dariun's strikes now. Then Qaran's horse slipped, throwing its rider to the ground. Qaran's sword flew from his hand. As he scrambled to his feet, hands raised protectively over his head, he said in a hoarse, strained tone, "Wait, Dariun. Listen to me!"

"What is it now?"

“Just hold on. If you knew the truth, you would not blame me for what I’ve done. Please, hear me out –“

Dariun’s sword flashed out. Not to cut down Qaran, but to knock aside a sudden rain of arrows. When the brief onslaught came to a stop, Dariun glimpsed Qaran’s fleeing back among the ranks of the Lusitanian archers. There were about fifty riders. They nocked new arrows to their bows, watching for their enemy’s approach. Dariun abandoned all thoughts of pursuit and turned his horse away.

“Plenty of chances left to kill him,” Dariun told himself. Upon him still weighed the great responsibility entrusted to him by his uncle. He had to rescue Prince Arslan from this fray and bring him safely back to the capital. He could not throw away his life in a fit of passion here.

As Dariun galloped off, dozens of arrows came flying at his back, but none of them found their mark. In saving Qaran from his vengeful figure, the Lusitanian archers had already fulfilled their duty.



1. The Battle of Atropatene (v)

Unlike his Shah, Eran Vahriz had experienced loss in battle before. The elderly warrior murmured to the grimacing Andragoras, “Your Majesty, this battle can no longer be won. Please, sound the retreat!”

With a glare, the king began to bellow at the Eran. How could the Shah of Pars, rightful defender of the Great Continental Road, simply run away without a care? Such an act would bring him shame as a warrior!

“Have you forgotten, sire? When Misr invaded last year, it was also from behind the walls of Ecbatana that we forced their retreat. For the sake of future victory, I beg you to endure this present shame!”

At the capital of Ecbatana awaited 20,000 cavalrymen and 45,000 infantrymen, and stationed throughout the rest of the kingdom were 20,000 more cavalrymen and 12,000 more infantrymen. If one were to muster all these forces in addition to the surviving soldiers and generals of the current battle, that should provide sufficient military power to counter the Lusitanian troops.

Of such tactical considerations Andragoras the strategist was well aware. However, he was not just the sovereign of a single nation, but also Lord Protector of the Great Continental Road.

The Great Continental Road, centered at Pars, was a trading route stretching 800 farsangs⁸ east to west, connecting the two ends of the vast continent. The entirety of this route and the caravans that traveled upon it all laid under the protection of the Parsian king and paid tribute to him. Thus was the kingdom’s prosperity assured. Was this too not the privilege brought about by undefeated military prowess?

Nonetheless the old general continued trying to persuade his king. So too did the king continue to resist, until at last the name of his queen Tahmineh reached his ear. What of the welfare of the queen, who yet defended the capital? Surely he did not intend to leave her to the enemy? As soon as

⁸ ~4000 km

those words were spoken, the king came to a decision and made the move to retreat. However, not all of his men were in accord.

“The king has fled! Andragoras the Third has fled!”

Amid the bloody chaos, these cries raced to the ends of the battlefield like a fierce wind. Those under Qaran’s banner had kept close watch on King Andragoras’s movements. The will of the Parsian troops still locked in bitter struggle visibly faltered.

“Though we have staked our lives on this battle, the king who leads us has fled! The banners of Pars have been soiled in disgrace. There is no more hope for recovery!”

The Marzban Shapur removed his bloody, mudstained helm and flung it to the ground. And yet he still held his king in some regard; others displayed expressions of far greater betrayal.

“Forget it, forget it! Just who’re we fighting for anyway? There’s no need for us to throw away the lives of our subordinates for a fleeing liege!”

One-eyed Qobad flourished his longsword again, shaking the blood from his blade as he hollered at his men. They glanced at each other in uneasy confusion.

“What the hell are you saying, Qobad?” shouted Shapur, spurring his mount over. “How can you who is Marzban command his warriors to cease battling? The king has his duties. So too do we have ours.”

“The foremost duty of a king is to protect his country. For this reason alone does a king possess the right to rule. Should the king no longer be worthy of rulership, it’ll be the same for us. Were you not cursing him just now as well?

“No, that was a careless gesture on my part. Come to think of it, it is not that the king has fled. Rather, he must surely be heading back to Ecbatana in preparation for the next assault. As a retainer, you should not cast such

aspersions upon your liege, or even your allies shall not have mercy on you!"

"Oh? Interesting. And just what do you mean by that?" Qobad's single eye narrowed.

Among the Marzbans, Qobad was the youngest after Dariun and Keshvad. He was presently thirty-one years of age. The single scar carved deeply into his face across his left eye left an indelible impression on any who saw him. He was unquestionably a fierce warrior and experienced tactician, but despite his impressive record, his reputation suffered among certain factions at court. Part of the reason for this was his tendency toward boastful exaggeration. He claimed, for instance, that his left eye had been lost in an epic showdown with an *azhdahak*, a three-headed dragon, in faraway Mount Qaf. Furthermore, he himself had in turn stabbed out a single eye on each of the dragon's three heads. In other words, "The three-headed dragon's now a three-eyed dragon." Most people naturally took it as a joke, and some even frowned upon his indiscretion.

Shapur, who was thirty-six, was Qobad's polar opposite: an exceedingly uptight man. Perhaps they themselves were conscious of this fact, for it was rumored that whenever the twelve Marzbans were summoned, the two men never failed to arrange themselves at either end of the line.

In any case, this pair of rare valor each laid a hand on the hilt of his sword as he glared down his Marzban comrade. The soldiers of Pars panicked. But before the bloodthirsty aura could come to a head, there sounded a cry of "Enemy attack!" At the sight of the approaching Lusitanian troop, Qobad steered his mount aside.

"Running away, Qobad?"

The one-eyed Marzban clucked his tongue in response to this rebuke. "Much as I'd like to, without driving off these enemy forces there won't be anywhere to run. Why don't we have our little chat about a retainer's responsibilities once I've taken care of these bastards?"

“Very well! Don’t you dare claim you’ve forgotten all about it come tomorrow!” With a pointed glare, Shapur galloped off to give his men their orders.

“I won’t. Not if there still is a tomorrow!” Whether he spoke in seriousness or in jest, Qobad headed back toward his own men as well.

“Now then. Still got a thousand or so riders left, huh. Wonder how I should handle it with these numbers? Better take along the crazy ones.”

Those who had fled with King Andragoras met with obstruction on the narrow trail arching over the waters of the Mirbalan River. Just as they thought they had left the echoes of sword and spear far behind and successfully escaped the battlefield, an incoming arrow pierced through one rider’s face. The rider’s death cry as he tumbled from his horse preluded a slew of arrows hailing down all at once with the terrible noise of a locust swarm taking flight. It was an ambush.

At either side of the Shah and Eran men and horses alike toppled like brittle stone pillars. Both king and general were hit as well, the arrows piercing through their armor and digging into their flesh.

When the rain of arrows ceased, not one single survivor remained in their vicinity. A lone rider spurred his horse over to face them. He bore not the arms of Lusitania but those of Pars. And yet it was something else entirely that seized the attention of the king and his general.

A silver mask. It covered the entire face but for narrow slits at the eyes and the mouth. And through the eye slits leaked a cold, savage gleam.

In the light of day, both king and general would have certainly guffawed at the sight. The silver mask seemed far too much like something out of a play, something impossible to imagine existing in reality.

But here under the dim gray veil of fog, where the very landscape seemed submerged in the darkness of a Serican ink painting, the mask seemed to

freeze within itself the accumulated misfortune and calamity of the entire world.

“Abandoning your men, Andragoras? How shameless. And how very like you.”

Fluent Parsian sounded through the mouth slit. The voice possessed a quality that caused a man’s heart to grow chill.

“Flee, my liege! Let these old bones hold here...”

Vahriz, body pierced through with five arrows, drew his sword from its scabbard and planted his horse between the king and the man of the silver mask.

An intense light emanated from the eyes of the silver mask, burning with the radiance of fury and hatred combined.

“Doddering old failure! Enough of your posturing!”

The masked man unleashed a thundering cry. His longsword, glittering white, arced toward the general’s head in a single stroke. Even against an opponent both mortally wounded and advanced in age, his blade did not hold back, leaving not the slightest opening for Vahriz, great Eran of Pars, to counter. It was a breathtaking display of swordsmanship.

Andragoras watched on with deadened eyes as his faithful old retainer’s body crumpled heavily to the ground. His sword arm did not move. It could not, for the arrow piercing his wrist had injured muscle. Left with no further means of resistance, the king could only sit helplessly upon his saddle like a clay doll.

“Do not kill him.”

The voice behind the silver mask trembled. Naturally, not from terror, but from a wave of barely suppressed passion. Compared to when he was facing Vahriz, he was an entirely different man.

“Do not kill him. For sixteen years I have waited for this day. How could I grant him such easy release?”

Five or six riders from the man’s troop pulled King Andragoras from his mount. The pain from his arrow wound flared, but the king endured it.

“Who the hell are you?” Andragoras, wrapped and bound with thick thongs, whispered hoarsely.

“Soon. You shall know soon enough. Or perhaps, Andragoras, you do not understand what sins you must have committed in order to warrant such enmity?”

Behind every word grated a noise like scraping metal. It was the sound of gnashing teeth — as if in that very action, the man of the silver mask could grind away the long endless days of bitter obscurity.

When he noticed the disquieted expressions of his men upon seeing him in such a state, he of the silver mask wordlessly turned his horse away. Those encircling the captive King Andragoras did not rejoice in their victory, and continued down the narrow trail to the opposite shore in gloomy silence.

1. The Battle of Atropatene (vi)

Even after Andragoras’s departure from the battlefield, blood continued to flow. All across the plains, the fires showed no signs of extinguishing. Wind arose from the billowing smoke, joining the chaotic swirl of fog. Pars was originally a land blessed with sun and clear skies, yet now it seemed as if even the weather itself had abandoned the kingdom.

With momentum on their side, the Lusitanian troops resumed their cycle of attack and slaughter. No longer were the Parsians fighting for their king; rather, it was for their own lives and honor that they continued to resist. Futile as their efforts were, the Persian knights were unquestionably strong. Even as the Lusitanians claimed victory after victory, their ranks suffered much loss as well. Upon leaving their sturdy bulwarks to join the offensive, the Lusitanians’ dead soon surpassed those of the Persians. Dariun alone was perhaps ready to take responsibility for at least half of

the Lusitanian's hatred himself. Before long, he came across Marzban Qobad's troops in the midst of the blood and flame. While celebrating their mutual survival, they exchanged some hurried inquiries.

"Have you not happened upon Prince Arslan by any chance, Lord Qobad?"

"The prince? Dunno." With that blunt response, Qobad gave the young knight another look-over, cocking his head suspiciously. "What happened to your men? Got all ten thousand of them wiped out?"

"I am no longer Marzban."

Dariun was filled with a sense of bitterness. Qobad seemed as if he wanted to say something, but changed his mind and instead asked Dariun to join him in fighting their way out of the battlefield.

"My apologies, but I made a promise to my uncle. I must locate His Royal Highness Arslan."

"Then take a hundred of mine!"

Respectfully declining Qobad's well-intended offer, Dariun galloped off alone once more. Whether it was ten thousand men or one hundred men, any entourage would serve only to draw the enemy's attention, contrarily bringing greater danger and turning them all into sitting ducks.

As the fierce winds began to disperse the fog, the physical aspect of the battlefield was at last exposed. Grass sprouted amid the corpses, drenched in blood. But even the realization that he had become inured to the stench of blood and smoke and sweat made no difference to Dariun's efforts.

Five Lusitanian knights materialized in his path, a most undesired development. If possible, he would have liked for his passing to be ignored, but it seemed the other party had already taken note of him. It was in any case five against one. To them, he must have seemed like easy sport.

“Why, if it isn’t a defeated Parsian dog loitering around for scraps! Looks like you’ve got nowhere to go — how about we help send you along your way?”

Dariun should not have been able to understand them, but after exchanging these mocking whispers in Lusitanian, the five riders raised their spears as one and came charging.

For the Lusitanians, this was perhaps the unluckiest day of their lives. Dariun’s blade cut through them, sending them on to their heaven.

As the fourth man went flying beneath a spray of blood, Dariun observed at the edge of his vision the lone silhouette of the final man, who had dropped his sword and fled. But he made no move to pursue. Among the riderless horses aimlessly ambling about, there was one upon whose saddle was bound a bloody, wounded man. It was a single Parsian knight who had been taken captive.

Pulling up alongside him, Dariun leaped off his horse and used his sword to sever the thongs binding the knight.

He did not know the knight’s name, but held some recognition for his face. The man was one of the thousand-rider captains who served under the Marzban Shapur. Dariun untied a leather flask from his saddle and poured water over the blood and grime dirtying the man’s face. The man let out a low moan and opened his eyes.

From the lips of this deeply injured man Dariun received information on Prince Arslan’s whereabouts. Having broken through the enveloping net of fire and smoke, it seemed the prince had fled east under the protection of a measly handful of knights. Wheezing painfully, the man continued, “Of the Marzbans, Lords Manuchehr and Hayir have fallen. Our general Lord Shapur sustained grave wounds as well from both fire and arrow. Whether he still lives or not...”

Hearing of the deaths of his friends and comrades, Dariun felt a pang in his heart. However, he had yet to fulfill his mission. Dariun helped the man back onto the horse and handed him the reins.

“I would escort you to safety, but I am under orders from the Eran to search for the crown prince Arslan. Please escape without me!”

It took the wounded man all of his strength just to keep his seat. That said, it was unthinkable to abandon him here on the battlefield. Lusitanians slew every last one of their defeated enemies. Dariun had heard that it served as some sort of display of faith in their god.

After parting with the man, Dariun had ridden about a hundred gaz when he succumbed to a sudden urge and looked back. The horse no longer bore a rider. Instead, long neck stretched out, it nosed mournfully at a crumpled figure on the ground. Dariun sighed and continued east, no longer looking back.

Around Arslan, not a single ally could be found. His father the king had not bestowed many men upon him to begin with. Although it was true his father had permitted him to act independently, the king himself had been captain to five thousand riders in his own first foray, whereas Arslan had been given command of no more than a hundred. For that reason Arslan had thought to build a record through his own ability, thus proving himself worthy of generalship. However, the reality was that he had lost every single one of his men to the chaos of battle and flame. Half of them had fallen in battle; the remaining half had been dispersed. His cloak was scorched, his spear broken, his horse exhausted. He was hurting everywhere. That he still lived was all the more so a wonder. Arslan sighed and tossed away his spear.

It was at this very moment that a single Lusitanian rider came charging, lance raised. Decked in golden armor as he was, Arslan was unmistakeable as a prince of his country. He must have seemed a most excellent prize. Entire body seized with fear, Arslan galloped forth, drawing his sword to face his opponent.

After the initial exchange, it was not Arslan himself but his mount that reached its limit and crashed to the ground. Arslan rolled back to his feet. With a flash of his sword, the spearhead protruding from the oncoming

horse was sliced away, to his own shock. He had not thought himself capable of such a deed, but he had in fact just saved his own life.

The knight dropped the mere pole that remained of his lance and drew his sword.

From the knight's mouth awkward Parsian spewed forth. The tongue of Pars served as the lingua franca of the Great Continental Road; any educated individual among the various nations was capable of such a level of communication.

"Well done, boy. Perhaps in five more years you would have become a swordsman whose name was praised through all of Pars. However, I'm sorry to say that both you and Pars shall come to an end today. You can complete the rest of your training with your fellow heathens in hell!"

This jeering was followed by a ferocious assault. Arslan was just barely able to parry the incoming slash, but the resulting impact from his palm to his shoulder was no small matter. The sensation had not yet dissipated when the second strike fell upon him. Right, left, right, left. As their blades continued to flash, Arslan kept up his defense with nothing but sheer instinct and reflex.

If one considered it disadvantageous to fight a mounted enemy while on foot, it was nothing short of miraculous for Arslan to be putting up such a good fight. Perhaps the Lusitanian knight's faith in his god wavered. Raising his voice in obvious frustration, he suddenly pulled his horse into a rear. It seemed he meant to trample Arslan beneath its hooves. At that very moment, Arslan stumbled to the ground, and the knight grew confident of his success. In the next instant, as the horse kicked down onto solid earth, the knight's throat was pierced through by the sword Arslan had thrown.

For some time Arslan sat there, hearing nothing but the sound of his own breathing. It was the clatter of swiftly nearing hoofbeats that roused him. Upon casting his gaze in the direction of the sound, he leaped up in a dreamlike state and waved his arms.

"Dariun! Dariun! Over here!"

“Oh, Your Highness. Are you unharmed?”

Arslan could think of no more dependable sight than that of the young knight’s pitch black figure leaping down from his equally black horse to kneel on the ground before him. Dariun’s helm and armor were painted with spatters of dried human blood. Just what manner of hardship had it taken the man to find him?

“I was sent to find Your Highness under orders from the Eran.”

“I am most grateful. But what of my lord father?”

“As long as my uncle and the Athanatoi are with him, I believe they have most likely succeeded in their escape,” replied Dariun. Suppressing his own sense of unease, he added, “It is on behalf of His Majesty’s concern for your welfare that I have come.”

This was a lie, concocted out of the need to convince the prince to depart from this place. For a moment, under a gaze clear and dark as the unclouded night, Dariun’s heart faltered.

“Lingering on the battlefield any longer is meaningless. Consider this also His Majesty’s will when I beg you to prioritize your own safety.”

“Understood. However, if we are to return to the capital, we must traverse the battlefield once more. Unquestioned though your might and courage be, is this not a hopeless feat?”

Regarding this, Dariun had already laid plans.

“Let us call upon my friend Narses. He has secluded himself in hermitage at Mount Bashur. For the present, I suggest that we take refuge with him and watch for a suitable opportunity before thinking of a way to return to the capital.”

The prince tilted his head doubtfully. “But according to what I have heard, is it not said that there has been a rift between Narses and my lord father?”

“Indeed. Had our troops claimed victory today, and Your Highness were to approach him as a vanquishing hero, Narses would likely refuse the meeting. However, by what one might call some happy chance or miracle, it is now we who are the pitiful vanquished.”

“The vanquished... Hm, true.”

The gloom in Arslan’s voice was quite understandable.

“It is for that very reason he will not turn us away. He is, as my uncle stated, a contrary sort of man. Let us rely on that!”

“But Dariun...” The youth’s voice and gaze were, for the first time, impassioned. “Upon the battlefield remain many of our own men. Are we to go and abandon them?”

Dariun’s expression turned grave.

“Now that things have come to this, I am afraid we are left with no choice. Seek a rematch on some later date! Only by staying alive now may we avenge their grievances!”

After a long silence, Arslan nodded.

The yet undispersed fog and swiftly descending dusk competed for dominion over the land. By their aid, Arslan and Dariun were able to evade capture from the Lusitanian troops and escape, vanishing into the dense forests and deep valleys of the Bashur Mountains. Even the most persistent of pursuers, were he to recall the number of corpses accumulating in the wake of Dariun’s hoofbeats, could not help but quail. On this day, the existence of a black rider of Pars who had cut down innumerable Lusitanian knights of renown had, to the Lusitanians, become akin to a fragment from a nightmare.

When the half moon rose, illuminating the fog that still clung so stubbornly to the plains, all fighting ceased at last.

As the Lusitanians made their rounds through the illuminated battlefield, any injured Parsians they came across were given no chance to resist or to flee, but instead slain on the spot as “heathens.” Their god and their clergymen had commanded them thus. For the sins of pagan worship and denial of the “One True God”, redemption could be found only in the cruellest of deaths. Even those who took pity on the heathens were considered to be in defiance of God’s will and would be condemned to hell in the afterlife. Perhaps in part drunk on blood, the Lusitanian soldiers sang praises to the glory of their god Ialdabaoth even as they slit the throats of the wounded and gouged out their hearts.

On the sixteenth day of the tenth month of the 320th year of Pars, upon the plains of Atropatene, 53,000 Parsian cavalrymen and 74,000 Parsian infantrymen lost their lives in battle, halving the military power of the entire kingdom. On the victorious Lusitanian side, casualties also numbered more than 50,000 in cavalry and infantry combined. To have received such a heavy blow under such advantageous circumstances and with such a perfectly laid plot was, from a certain perspective, rather horrific. Then again, all these men who had died with honor would no doubt be extolled as martyrs basking in divine glory.

“Alas, so many of our people now lie unburied upon foreign lands, no thanks to that possessed king of ours and that accursed murderer of a holy man!”

“It’s just as well, don’t you think? All those poor souls can now go to heaven, while for the living, all of this bountiful land of Pars is now ours to do with as we please. The Great Continental Road, the silver mines, vast fields of grain!”

Baudouin laughed through the blood staining his face, but Montferrat’s expression remained sullen as they rode toward the tent of their king, Innocentius VII. The dying howl of a Parsian as his heart was ripped from him reverberated through the stillness of the night, startling Monferrat. Previously, during the pillage of Maryam, even children and infants had been thrown into the fires to burn alive. The Kingdom of Maryam was no heathen nation, and in fact shared the Lusitanians’ faith in Ialdabaoth. But

simply because they had refused to acknowledge the Lusitanian king's religious authority, they had been deemed "enemies of God."

"Even now the screams from that time have not left my ear. Would God truly bless even those who would kill an infant just because it was born heathen?"

However, Baudouin did not hear him. Montferrat's brooding was overpowered by a great cry resounding from up ahead.

"We've captured the Parsian king!"

Hundreds of Lusitanian soldiers called out in refrain, their voices unified as if in song.

Chapter 2: Mount Bashur

2. Mount Bashur (i)

Let us now wind back five years before the Battle of Atropatene, to the year 315 of the Parsian calendar. That year, the three kingdoms of Turan, Sindhura, and Turk formed an alliance, mustered a conquering force of fifty thousand along the eastern borders of Pars, and commenced an invasion. Turan, having in the past done battle with Pars many a time on relatively even terms, was a historic rival. With Sindhura, who now shared a direct border with Pars, there had been ceaseless skirmishes ever since the fall of the Principality of Badakhshan. And Turk coveted Pars's hold over trade and tribute along the Great Continental Road.

Each had its own motives, but in making trouble for Pars their interests were aligned. And so they conspired to attack Pars all at the same time: Turan from the northeast, Turk from the east, and Sindhura from the southeast. Even the famously valorous King Andragoras could not remain unfazed. Not only did he mobilize all his armies, he also sent summons to all the governors of the kingdom, the aristocratic *shahrdaran*, ordering them to muster their own personal troops at the capital of Ecbatana.

Among the *shahrdaran* was a lord by the name of Teos who reigned over the region of Dailam, overlooking the Darband Inland Sea to the north. He was an old friend of the king, and promised to ride out with five thousand horsemen and thirty thousand foot soldiers, much to the king's joy.

Just as they were about to set out, Teos slipped on some steps in his mansion and died from the hit to his head against a stone ledge. Upon receiving notification of this incident, the king was shocked, but for the time being, instated Teos's son Narses as the lord's successor. Even if Teos had passed away, that military force of his remained of utmost import to the king.

Not long after that Narses appeared at Ecbatana with his troops. The king at first rejoiced, then grew stunned, and at last upset — for the troops Narses had brought numbered two thousand cavalrymen and three thousand infantrymen. This was not at all what had been expected.

“Why did you not bring more troops? I had an agreement with your father.”

“My humblest apologies.”

In this mild manner, the then twenty-one-year-old lord offered a bow. The king just barely managed to refrain from shouting.

“Apologies are only to be expected. I want reasons!”

“The truth is, I have emancipated all the slaves of our household.”

“What...!?”

“As Your Majesty must also be aware, the foot soldiers were all slaves, so the infantry was of course no more. By announcing that I would hand out wages if they came, I managed somehow to amass these five thousand men and bring them with me here.”

“And the decrease in your cavalry’s numbers?”

“Being shocked by these developments, they left my humble employ. There is no helping it, I am afraid.” Despite the impeccable courtesy of his speech, his lack of shame came across as nonchalance. “Ah, truly it cannot be helped. I understand all too well how they must have felt.”

King Andragoras had always been a short-tempered, obstinate sort of man. All the disappointment and dissatisfaction that had been exuding from his burly mass focused now into a glare directed at Narses. And yet before this kingly gaze that could terrorize even the most seasoned of warriors, the youth retained his composure. In fact, he proceeded to voice out loud what no sane man would even consider.

“How about this? Should Your Majesty so desire, I do have a strategy that shall impel all three armies of the enemy alliance to retreat...”

“What a boast! I don’t suppose you expect me to hand you an army of ten thousand?”

“There is no need for a single soldier. All I should require is a bit of time.”

“Time, you say?”

“At your will. Given about five days, I shall be able to chase them all out of the kingdom’s borders. However, it is true that in the end Your Majesty’s military strength shall still be required...”

Andragoras gave the youth his consent. It was not so much that he believed in him as it was that he wanted to see the look on his face when he failed.

The young man, along with around ten of his subordinates, disappeared from the encampment. Most people assumed he had fled. Andragoras believed so as well, and further resolved to seize the territories of Dailam and bring them back under royal control. About three days had passed when Narses suddenly returned and made another request of the king. Of the prisoners of war who had been captured from the three-kingdom alliance, he asked to be given charge of the Sindhurans. Once more Andragoras gave his consent, if only because Eran Vahriz remarked, “If one’s swallowed poison, one might as well finish the whole plate.”

As soon as Narses accepted those two thousand Sindhuran prisoners, he allowed them all to flee. The warriors who had done difficult battle to capture these prisoners were upset, and demanded to know just what he was trying to pull. Even Dariun could not restrain them.

At Narses’s expression of feigned ignorance, one enraged thousand-rider captain drew his blade, challenging him to a duel. The victor was soon apparent. Narses, previously thought of as some bookish young master, disarmed his opponent in less than five exchanges. Narses shouted at the riled up gathering of warriors, “Anyone else? Tonight, the Turks will attack the Sindhurans, even as the Turanians ambush the Turks. If you don’t prepare for the offensive now, you’ll lose your chance for heroics!”

Only Vahriz and Dariun, then only a thousand-rider captain, believed him.

His prediction hit the mark. That very night, violent internal dissent arose among the three allied nations. The Persian army took the opportunity to

rout their enemies. Outshining all others in terms of heroics was Dariun, who cut down the Turkish king's younger brother from his horse in a single stroke.

Upon Dariun's commendation, Narses simply smiled and replied, "Oh please, it was nothing. Sometimes, a single rumor can overcome an army of ten thousand."

Narses and his men, in those three days, had been spreading various fabricated rumors. For the Turks, it was, "The Sindhurans have betrayed you and are liaising with the Parsians. As proof of this, in one or two days the Sindhuran prisoners of war will all be released." To the Turanians, it was, "The Turks are conspiring with the Parsians. They're planning to ambush the Sindhurans soon, most likely using the excuse that the Sindhurans are liaising with the Parsians. You mustn't believe them."

And the released Sindhuran prisoners were told the following: "The truth is, our lord the king of Pars and your king of Sindhura have been in talks for reconciliation since a while back. However, it seems the Turks and the Turanians have caught wind of this. Be wary of attack from those you thought were your allies."

... Thus had the alliance started jumping at shadows and suspecting every little thing, all the while disintegrating steadily from within.

At any rate, Narses's peculiar stratagem had succeeded; it could not be denied that the enemy alliance's self-destruction had saved the kingdom of Pars. Andragoras had no choice but to commend him, reconfirming his successorship of his lands, rewarding him ten thousand dinars, and appointing him as a *dibir*, a high-ranking court scribe. It was widely rumored that he would even someday ascend to the position of *framatar*, or steward of the realm.

For Narses, the stiff formality of court was infinitely less preferable to living his life as he pleased at home in his own domain, but the king would not permit him this latter. By now, Andragoras did at least consider Narses's ingenuity and insight a valuable asset. And so Narses had no choice but to stay in the capital.

Two years of relative peace and stability ensued. Dariun and Narses both gained reputations in their respective positions as military officer and civil minister. However, in the 317th year of Pars, a diplomatic mission was sent east to establish relations with Serica, the kingdom of silk, and Dariun was assigned as captain of the guard for the expedition. Narses, well versed in Serican history and culture, was greatly envious of his friend, but nonetheless held a celebratory feast to send him off.

It was at this time that King Andragoras's authority began to slacken, and the iniquities of his ministers and the priests and the nobility grew more conspicuous than ever.

By this time, Narses was more than fed up with life as a court official. Upon opening an investigation into administrative affairs, he presented Andragoras with various reforms, but few if any were implemented to his satisfaction. Andragoras was more interested in war than in administration; and especially with the kingdom's coffers full and no extant threat from outside foes, instigating reforms now would inevitably create enemies among the priests and nobility. The king ignored Narses's proposed reforms, but the matter did not end there. For a petition came now from the priests, demanding that the king exile Narses from court.

Narses, you see, had also been investigating the priests' abuse of their privileged positions to perpetrate sundry transgressions. Not only were the priests exempt from taxes, even if they were to commit a crime, they would not be arrested or executed.

They lent money to the peasantry at exorbitant interest rates and seized their lands when the money could not be repaid. They also monopolized the underground *kariz* aqueducts and reservoirs, imposing a water tax on the people. If anyone resisted, they sent forth their personal troops to burn and pillage, and afterwards divvied up the spoils. The salt they sold to the public was cut with sand. If the peasantry dug their own wells, they poisoned the wells. After investigating and collecting proof of all these misdeeds, Narses requested that the king exact severe punishment upon the priests.

The infuriated priests plotted an ambush on Narses on his way back from court, but their attempt ended in failure. Of the eight assassins sent, four were cut down by Narses himself, two were injured and caught, and the remaining two just barely escaped with their lives. The priests immediately switched tacks and brought before the king accusations of Narses's unlawful intent to harm. Narses, perhaps figuring that it was about time anyway, absconded from court and returned to his own domains.

Dariun, upon returning from Serica and learning that his friend had been banished from court during his absence, was surprised but also regretful. Despite intending to pay a visit at some point, he had not yet had the chance to do so, when the Battle of Atropatene began.

2. Mount Bashur (ii)

The hooting of an owl shattered the stillness, disturbing the flow of the chill night air.

“Have you not met Narses since then?”

In response to Arslan's query, Dariun nodded. They were traversing a mountain trail in the deep of night. The light of the half moon through the needled branches of the conifers cast the two riders and their horses in pale silver.

“Nevertheless, if that's all there was to the matter, I do not believe my lord father would have exiled him permanently from court. Was there nothing else to it?”

“The truth is...”

When he absconded from court, Narses left behind a letter for King Andragoras. As Dariun's uncle Vahriz put it, this was a rather uncalled for gesture. Nonetheless, in it Narses had written out a critique of the rampant corruption within the administration — of putting a halt to the priests' moneylending, of entrusting management of the *kariz* to peasant representatives, of instituting a justice system unaffected by rank or position, and other such suggestions.

O my liege, I beg you: open your eyes and bear witness to the true condition of your government! If only you were to look past that which is beautiful on the surface and face the ugly reality beneath, what a blessing that would be!

“Hmph, that bastard Narses! So he forgets the appointment We bestowed upon him and remonstrates with me in his conceit!”

The enraged Andragoras tore up the letter and ordered Narses’s arrest, but between Vahriz’s mollification and the fact that Narses had by then returned to his domains in Dailam, his fury subsided. All injunctions were dismissed but for the banishment from court, which suited Narses just fine. Secluding himself in a cottage in the mountains, he lived alone in peace, immersed in his painting and his foreign literature...

“Narses enjoys painting?”

Arslan’s question had been intended only as a cursory remark, but Dariun’s reply did not seem to be quite so negligible.

“Well, every man must have his vice.” On receiving a confused glance from the prince, he continued in a somewhat exasperated tone, “If one really must speak of it, it can only be described as an extreme case of passion in ineptitude. That man — when it comes to the movements of the heavens, the geography of distant lands, and the changing tides of history, there is nothing he does not know. However, in this one subject alone, the matter of his own artistic ability...”

A sudden whooshing noise pierced through the night. A pale sliver of light skimmed across their vision and stabbed into the trunk of a conifer. The horses whinnied in distress. Even as the two of them soothed their mounts, their eyes fell upon the single arrow buried in the trunk of the tree, glimmering in the moonlight.

“Take one more step, and the next one’ll find your face!”

From the dark depths of the forest echoed the voice of a boy who could only be about Arslan’s age.

“Beyond here lies the residence of my master Narses, the former lord of Dailam. No one is permitted past this boundary uninvited. Back off if you don’t want to be hurt!”

Dariun called out, “Elam, is that you? It’s Dariun! I’ve come to call upon your master, whom I’ve not seen in three years. Will you not let us pass?”

After a few beats of silence, the shadows rustled, and a human figure emerged in approach.

“Why, Lord Dariun, long time no see. Forgive me for not recognizing you!”

A youth with quiver slung over his back and short bow in hand bowed to Dariun. His uncovered hair shone black in the moonlight.

“I see you’ve grown. Is your master in good health?”

“Yes, very much so.”

“Same as ever then, I suppose, idling away his days with his unpresentable painting?”

The youth made a considering expression.

“What makes art good or bad, I don’t really understand. My folks’ last request was for me to take care of Lord Narses, that’s all. After all, Lord Narses was the one who raised them from *ghulam* to *azat*.”

The youth led the pair of them down the dark mountain trail. His night vision must have been most excellent, for his steps were not only light, but sure.

A cottage with a triangular roof made of stone and wood had been erected right at the edge of the forest before the grassy clearing beyond. Below the clearing burbled a stream, and overhead, the sky danced with stars. As the three of them neared, the door flung open, and light spilled out onto the

ground. The youth, breaking into a run, lowered his head before his master. Dariun, too, dismounted from his black horse and called out.

“Narses, it’s me, Dariun!”

“No need to announce yourself, you noisy fellow. I could hear you from a farsang away.”

The master of the cottage was no Dariun, but he was nonetheless tall and blessed with a well-proportioned body. He had a pleasant, intellectual sort of face, and despite his wicked tongue, his eyes were filled with warmth and laughter. He looked to be about a year younger than Dariun. His blue tunic and matching trousers gave off an impression of unaffected youth.

“Narses, this here is...”

“I am Arslan, the son of King Andragoras. I’ve heard quite a bit about you from Dariun.”

“My, is that so? I’m afraid I’ve dirtied your noble ears.” Narses laughed and bowed, then turned to face the youth. “Elam, if it’s not too much trouble, would you mind bringing our guests here some refreshments?”

The diligent youth led their two horses to the back of the cottage before heading to the kitchen. In the meantime, both Arslan and Dariun shed their armor. Though they should not have yet reached the point of fatigue, their bodies felt conspicuously lighter.

Now the young page, or *retak*, came bearing large platters. Grape wine, stewed bird, flatbread smeared in honey, skewers of grilled mutton and onion, cheese, dried apples, dried figs, dried apricots, and all sorts of other savory scents wafted through the air, whetting Arslan and Dariun’s appetites. Come to think of it, not only had there never been a day until now in which they had depleted so much of their bodily reserves, they hadn’t eaten a thing since breaking fast that morning.

After seating themselves at a low wooden table, they focused wholeheartedly on the food for some time. While Elam waited on them,

Narses sipped leisurely at a glass of wine and watched on, as if marveling at their appetites.

When all the food that had been laid out on the table was now settled in the guests' stomachs, Elam tidied up the tableware, brought out the post-meal green tea, then bowed to Narses and retired to his own room.

"Thanks to your hospitality, I feel returned to my senses. I owe you my gratitude."

"No need for thanks, Your Highness Arslan. I once received ten thousand dinars from your lord father. Today's meal hardly even amounts to a drachm, you know."

Narses laughed when he saw the look on his old friend Dariun's face.

"Well, then. I'm already aware of your general circumstances, but let's hear the details now. Our armies suffered a great loss at Atropatene, didn't they?"

As Dariun related the circumstances of the battle at Atropatene, Narses slurped at his tea and listened. Upon reaching the part about Qaran's betrayal, his brows narrowed, but he did not otherwise express any surprise at the Lusitanians' tactics.

"The primary asset of a cavalry is its mobility. If one wishes to overcome that, the only possible strategy is to seal their movements. Encircling with ditches and fences, setting fires, taking advantage of fog. Even using a traitor. There must be some wise fellow among those Lusitanian barbarians, eh?"

"Yes, there must be. Therefore I wish to borrow your wisdom in turn, for Prince Arslan's sake."

"Now, Dariun, you have come a long way indeed. However, I no longer harbor any desire for nor attachment to worldly matters."

“But surely it is far better than holing away in the mountains doodling those crappy pictures of yours!”

At the mention of “crappy pictures,” Narses’s expression turned sullen.

“I can already imagine what this Dariun fellow means to say. You mustn’t give him any credence, Your Highness. This fellow may be a peerless warrior of our nation, and can indeed be quite principled and discerning, but he possesses not even the slightest whit of artistic sensibility. Truly, it is most deplorable.”

Dariun was about to protest, but Narses raised a hand to silence him.

“Art is eternal. The rise and fall of nations, a fleeting instant.”

The solemnity of Narses’s pronouncement moved his company. Arslan, taken aback, remained silent; Dariun cast aside his usual gravity and grinned. Or perhaps, more accurately, he could not help but smile.

Recovering himself, the prince said, “Even if this is one of those instants you speak of, we cannot simply cross our arms and do nothing. Please, Narses. I would like to hear your thoughts on this matter.”

“Well, if it’s my thoughts you want... The Lusitanians believe in Ialdabaoth, their one true god. On one hand, all believers are equal in the eyes of this god. On the other hand, all believers are enjoined to wipe the followers of other religions from the face of the earth. This I heard from Maryamian travelers, but in all likelihood they too are now no more than corpses of so-called heretics buried in the wilds and mountains of Ecbatana.”

“I shall not allow the followers of this god to succeed in their aim. How do you think this should best be handled?”

“At this point, Your Highness Arslan, it is too late to do anything. His Majesty your father ought to have abolished the institution of *ghulam* altogether. What reason do those oppressed by a nation have, to fight for the sake of said nation?”

Narses's voice was tinged with fervor. A change had occurred at some point. His heart was no longer that of a hermit who had forsaken the world.

"What happens next can already be foreseen. The Lusitanian army will encourage the slaves to convert to the Ialdabaothan faith, and grant freedom to those who do so. If they are then given arms and incited to action, acting in concert with the Lusitanians, Pars shall be annihilated. After all, the *ghulam* far outnumber both the nobles and the priests."

As Narses concluded rather cynically with this ominous prediction, Arslan, swelling with unease, raised an objection.

"However, Ecbatana shall not fall. Last year, when the great armies of Misr laid siege to the capital, it did not even waver in the slightest."

Narses looked at the prince with pity.

"Your Highness, even Ecbatana has not long left. Indeed, the gates of the capital shall not be brought down so easily by fire arrow or battering ram. However, external attacks are hardly the only viable tactic in warfare, you see."

"You mean, if the *ghulam* in the capital were to cooperate with the Lusitanians?"

"Exactly, Dariun. The Lusitanians will no doubt appeal to them from outside: 'O slaves of the city! Rise up and cast down your oppressors! Our god Ialdabaoth promises you all freedom and equality! Both lands and riches are yours for the taking!' Something like that'd be pretty effective, wouldn't you say?"

After a brief glance at Arslan, who seemed to be mulling deeply over something in silence as if he had swallowed his voice, Dariun inquired after possible countermeasures to such a scenario.

"Ah, that's right, I suppose we could promise the *ghulam* soldiers that of course they would also be raised to *azat* as a reward for doing well in battle. That ought to work for a while. But it wouldn't last long, eh?"

“I intend to return to Ecbatana before then,” said the prince. “Narses, please. Will you not lend us your wisdom after all?”

Narses averted his gaze from the prince’s earnest eyes.

“I am truly sorry, Your Highness, but it is my intent to seclude myself in these mountains and dedicate the rest of my days to the creation of Art. I already hold no more concern for the world outside this mountain. Please do not think ill of me — no, even if you should, it cannot be helped...”

Dariun shoved aside his teacup on the table.

“Narses! Is there not an excellent line that goes, ‘Apathy is but a breeding ground for Evil; ’tis no ally of Good’?”

“Excellent? Pretentious, rather. Who said it?”

“Why, you did, Narses. When we were drinking together, the night before I left for Serica.”

“... That certainly is some worthless drivel you’ve remembered.”

Narses tutted in disapproval, but Dariun persisted.

“It’s said that the Lusitanians massacre all non-worshippers of their god Ialdabaoth. Don’t you think it’s doubtful that a people who would discriminate thus in their god’s name would truly have any intent to emancipate the *ghulam*? ”

“Even if that is so, a slave would certainly choose to be released from the undeniable dissatisfactions of the present, rather than the uncertain horrors of the future.”

Having so declared, Narses turned to face the prince. “Your Highness Arslan, I am not in your lord father’s favor. If you insist on employing me as an adviser, it shall only deepen his displeasure. I daresay that won’t do you much good.”

Looking terribly young and so very unlike his father the king, the prince allowed a bitter smile to flash across his delicate face.

“That is not an issue. I myself have never been in my lord father’s favor. And Dariun here has also fallen from my lord father’s esteem. In any case, we are all of us fellows in his dislike. Is that not so?”

Was this prince truly so unaffectedly honest? Or was he just at a rebellious stage? Narses gave him a brief, considering glance. Arslan met his gaze with a starched, utterly guiltless expression, upon which Narses let out a small sigh.

“Whether in war or in politics, all fades to ash in the end. That alone which survives through posterity is the work of a Great Master. Truly I am aware of how rude this must seem, but I absolutely cannot make any promises about leaving this mountain. But if there is any way I might serve you during your stay here...”

“I understand. I apologize for needlessly pressing the matter.”

Arslan smiled gently. Then, weariness settling suddenly onto his face, he yawned.

2. Mount Bashur (iii)

For some time after the prince had crawled into bed in the adjacent room, Dariun and Narses continued their conversation in hushed tones. It was at this point that Dariun confided in his friend the peculiar orders of his Uncle Vahriz.

“That His Majesty can adore Queen Tahmineh to such an extent, and yet keep himself so oddly distanced from His Highness Arslan — I really cannot make sense of it.”

“The queen consort, eh...” muttered Narses, folding his arms. “I happened to see Queen Tahmineh a few times myself when I was a child. Her beauty was truly not of this world. But at any rate, before she became Prince Kayumars’s consort, it seems she was his *framatar*’s intended.”

“A lord steals his vassal’s intended? Such is the seed of national turmoil. And what happened to this miserable *framatar*?”

“Committed suicide, apparently. Pitiful to be certain, but I suppose there’s no guarantee things would have turned out better had he lived on.”

The two turned to their wine and fell silent, each recalling the history of events that had preceded Arslan’s birth.

In the 301st year of Pars and the thirtieth year of his reign, Shah Gotarzes II, Grand Protector of the Great Continental Road, passed away. The sixty-one-year-old king was survived by two sons, twenty-seven-year-old Osroes and twenty-five-year-old Andragoras. Before his passing, the king had already formally instated Osroes as crown prince, and as younger brother Andragoras was in full support of his older brother’s accession, Osroes succeeded the throne without incident.

The new king instated his younger brother as Eran, turning over command of the entire army to him. For two years the brothers successfully cooperated in upholding the legacies of their illustrious father, but it was not long before disaster came calling.

In the year 303 of Pars, civil discord arose in the southeastern Principality of Badakhshan, which had until then been allied with Pars. This nation had always been situated between Pars and Sindhura, and as such was sometimes on better terms with the former, and sometimes on better terms with the latter, but ever since the accession of Gotarzes II they had maintained an alliance with Pars. Despite this, upon Gotarzes II’s demise, the waning Sindhuran faction at the Badakhshan court began to wriggle back to life.

“The Kingdom of Pars owes its stability entirely to King Gotarzes. Without that great king, Pars is no longer to be relied upon. We ought to make a treaty with the Kingdom of Sindhura in order to ensure peace for our nation.”

As those voices gained in influence, the Principality of Badakhshan expelled the Parsian ambassador and established amicable relations with the Kingdom of Sindhura.

Andragoras made Vahriz his deputy commander and led ten thousand riders sweeping into the territories of Badakhshan. Prince Kayumars, the lord of Badakhshan, sent out a distress call to Sindhura requesting aid. Although Sindhura immediately sent relief forces, Andragoras had already, with cutthroat speed, traversed the entirety of Badakhshan and destroyed all the bridges on the river that the Sindhuran army needed to cross into the country. With the Sindhuran army's advance thus obstructed, Andragoras turned his own forces back around and seized the capital of Badakhshan, Helmandus. Prince Kayumars of Badakhshan threw himself off one of the city towers, and every last one of the two thousand ministers and generals of the Sindhuran faction who had tempted him down this path were killed by the conquering Parsians. Upon Andragoras announcing the annexation of Badakhshan to Pars, the Sindhuran army gave up and returned to their home country.

Up to this point the Kingdom of Pars still had no inkling or foreshadowing of the misfortune yet to come.

However, Andragoras had discovered inside the capital a single woman whose existence would soon irrevocably alter the destinies of the two royal brothers. That woman was the deceased Prince Kayumars's young consort Tahmineh.

Osroes gladly welcomed his victorious little brother back to the capital Ecbatana. To reward his brother, he intended to confer upon him the entire territory of former Badakhshan along with the title of Vice Regent.

But Andragoras shook his head and replied, "Brother, I need neither lands nor throne. All I ask for is Kayumars's consort..."

That he should make this request was in accordance with the laws of Pars. All spoils of war went first to the king, who then distributed them among his soldiers as he saw fit.

“What, more than land or position, you say you want but a single woman? What an undesirous fellow! Very well then, I shall give you that woman — along with a new estate, and jewels to adorn her with!”

After Andragoras gave thanks and took his leave, Osroes's curiosity was unexpectedly piqued by this woman who had stirred his brother's heart. When it came to warring and hunting and feasting, Andragoras showed plenty of enthusiasm, but never before had gossip linked him amorously with any woman.

Osroes secretly called upon the mansion where Tahmineh was being held under house arrest, and there beheld her taking a stroll in the courtyard under the light of the moon. By the time he departed from the mansion, he had decided to wed Tahmineh himself. Neither his station as king nor his position as an older brother carried weight with him any longer.

During his time as crown prince, Osroes had taken a wife at eighteen and by the following year had sired a son. After that, his wife passed away from illness, and he had never officially named a queen, preferring to maintain a bachelor's lifestyle. But now, he meant to bring those days to an end. The very next day, when Andragoras went to visit Tahmineh, she had already been moved to court on his brother's orders.

Andragoras was furious. He pressed his brother the king, declaring “This is not what you promised!” — but Osroes resorted to the excuse that there had been no witnesses nor written agreement and dismissed his brother's protests. At the same time, he granted his younger brother not only the territories of former Badakhshan and the position of Vice Regent, but also bestowed upon him 100,000 dinars and several beauties, thinking to placate him in this manner. However, Andragoras withdrew to his own estates and from then on refused to show his face at court.

Osroes had intended to wed Tahmineh by force, but due to the remonstrations of Vahriz and various other important retainers, he had no choice but to give up on that notion. No matter how he tried to defend himself, the fact remained that he had broken his promise to his younger brother.

Thus did the relationship between the brothers drastically sour, and discord spread throughout the court. If one were to compare, the sympathies of the courtiers lay in large part with the valorous warrior Andragoras, rather than the weak and ailing Osroes. Naturally, those who sided with the younger brother incurred Osroes's displeasure, and were expelled from court, exiled to provincial cities and border regions. Vahriz, too, was relegated to a fortress at the western border with Misr.

Andragoras was growing increasingly unamused. Abandoning his duties as Eran, he holed up in his own residence and drowned his sorrows in drink. For King Osroes, this served as a perfect excuse. He dismissed his younger brother from the position of Eran, demoted him to Marzban, and deployed him to the eastern border.

"If I keep Andragoras and Vahriz too close, they shall no doubt plot rebellion. Splitting them up east and west by three hundred farsangs shall keep them from being able to discuss betrayal with one another."

Such had been his considerations, but just as the new assignments were to be publicly announced, Osroes took to the sickbed. He had taken Tahmineh out hunting when his mount shied and threw him, injuring his shoulder. Because of this wound, he came down with a high fever.

After several days of unabated fever, the king's physical condition swiftly deteriorated. His physicians' arduous treatments were ineffective; the priests' prayers were in vain. The king descended into a critical state.

If a king were to die, he must have a successor to take his place. Usually it was the king's eldest male child who would continue the royal line, but as Osroes's son was only eleven years old at this point, the ceremonies formally naming him crown prince had not yet been held. Osroes had kept from doing so on account of younger brother Andragoras and his supporters. After all, powerful enemies lay on either side of Pars, and if a mere boy of eleven were to take the throne, it would no doubt stir the ambitions of those various nations.

On the nineteenth day of the fifth month, a cloudless summer night overflowing with moonlight and flowery fragrance, Andragoras, younger

brother of the king, was summoned to the royal palace. One hour later, news of Osroes's demise and Andragoras's accession was officially announced.

"King Osroes wrote a will stating that the prince was to succeed him after his death, with Andragoras serving as regent. But Andragoras smothered the king in his sickbed with a pillow and thus became king himself."

"No, King Osroes grew suspicious of the relationship between his younger brother and Consort Tahmineh. Mad with jealousy, he summoned his brother to the palace with murderous intent, only for the tables to be turned on him."

All manner of rumors propagated, but after Andragoras became Shah with the overwhelming support of the military, the people clamped their mouths shut. Not long afterward, a corner of the palace accidentally caught fire, and the previous king Osroes's son burned to death. The palace chef who took responsibility for setting the fire was executed. Subsequently, the newly kinged Andragoras named Vahriz Eran. The mysterious longstanding guest of the palace Tahmineh was wed to Andragoras in the following year, and accepted the mantle of queen. After another year, Prince Arslan was born...

And until this year, not even the slightest peep of conflict had stirred Andragoras's reign.

2. Mount Bashur (iv)

By the time Arslan awoke the next morning from a deep, dreamless slumber, the autumnal sun was already high overhead. It seemed rather embarrassing to be lazing around indulgently in bed despite all the hardship and difficulties he would no doubt be facing from now on. Bedding had been laid out on the floor, too, where Dariun seemed to have spent the night. Feeling that he had been cruelly monopolizing a great many privileges simply on account of being a king's son, Arslan grew subdued. He dressed hastily and headed to the adjacent room, where it seemed Dariun and Narses had also only just awoken.

Just as the three of them were exchanging their greetings, from the outside there sounded the rumble of hoofbeats. Everyone inside tensed at once.

The window was open a crack. Dariun peered through, sweeping his gaze across the scene outside. Though he'd not had the time to don his armor, he had with one hand already drawn his sword from its scabbard.

"I've seen those faces before. Qaran's men."

"Oho..." Narses tapped his chin with a finger. "Well, aren't they discerning — coming all the way here to search for you two. I suppose that's Qaran for you, to have trained such excellent subordinates..."

Suddenly Narses snapped his mouth shut and sent a suspicious gaze toward Dariun. Dariun attempted an innocent expression, but Narses shrewdly pressed on.

"I'd forgotten to inquire until now, Dariun, but by which route did you come here?"

Aware of Arslan's shocked stare affixed on his profile, Dariun shrugged his wide shoulders and offered a few place names.

"... Well, around thereabouts."

"Right past Qaran's stronghold!" groaned Narses, pitching a wild glare at Dariun's face. "You scoundrel! You knew perfectly well there were other ways here, but purposely chose the one route you knew Qaran's men would be watching! You meant to drag me into this from the start, to force me into becoming your ally, didn't you!?"

Having been seen through, Dariun came clean at once.

"Forgive me, but I had no choice. All was for the sake of your genius. Now that we've come to this, Narses, you might as well give up on that hermit lifestyle of yours or whatever and come serve His Royal Highness!"

Narses growled again and kicked at the floor. He had no time to settle things with Dariun. He bade Arslan and Dariun climb up into the ceiling from the adjacent room, then pulled away the ladder. Elam's voice echoed from the entrance.

"Lord Narses is still in slumber. I humbly request that you leave — ah, how rude!"

The door was forced open and Elam shoved aside as several soldiers stumbled in. When Narses had finished helping him back up, a total of six armored knights had entered. Each one rested a hand on his sword. No doubt they were aware of Narses's reputation with a blade.

The middle-aged man who seemed to be the eldest of the six spoke up. "You are none other than the former lord of Dailam, Sir Narses, if I am not mistaken."

"I am but an ordinary hermit."

"You *are* Sir Narses, aren't you!?"

"I am indeed Narses. However, having offered my name, I wonder if the other party might not identify themselves as well?"

Narses spoke in a voice so low he could barely be heard. For a moment the knights quailed, but on noticing that Narses carried no sword, they relaxed and became quite courteous.

"Our deepest apologies. We are here on the command of our lord, Eran Qaran of Pars."

Up in the darkness of the ceiling, long-limbed Dariun twitched. Arslan, too, stopped breathing. Ever since King Andragoras's accession, any mention of the Eran of Pars should have referred to Vahriz alone.

"Eran Qaran certainly has a nice ring to it. Be that as it may, the vicissitudes of the world truly are incommensurable. When I withdrew

from court, the commander-in-chief of this country was still the doyen Vahriz, but perhaps the good elder has retired as well?”

Narses raised his voice so that the hiding Dariun and company could hear clearly of these developments.

“Or perhaps, you cannot mean that he has passed away...”

“Old man Vahriz has indeed kicked the bucket. And not of illness either. Even now, his wrinkled head lies rotting before the gates of Ecbatana, mouth hanging open, demanding the surrender of everyone in the city!”

A violent tremor jolted through Dariun’s body. The sound seeped through the thick panels of the ceiling, arousing the knights’ suspicions.

“What was that noise?”

“Wild rats, no doubt. They’re always coming in after my grain stores, the nuisances. Incidentally, might I inquire what purpose you have all come calling for, so early in the morning?”

In truth, there was no need for him to ask, but Narses made the inquiry regardless, deliberately and shamelessly playing dumb. The knights pursed their lips in displeasure.

“Several witnesses have stated that they saw the defeated commanders Arslan, as well as Dariun, fleeing toward these mountains. Was the Lord Narses not aware of this?”

“Well, not in the slightest.”

“Truly?”

“You speak of defeated commanders, but to begin with, Dariun would never lose to anyone. As long as he did not encounter some incredibly ignoble treachery, that is.”

The knights' expressions filled visibly with rage, but their representative restrained his comrades.

"In that case, I do have a single request to make of you. In the name of our lord Eran Qaran, I ask that Sir Narses consider entering into our lord's employ. The honorable master's ingenuity, in addition to his first-rate swordsmanship, place him highly in our lord's regard..."

Narses stroked his chin, looking rather bored.

"Hm. In the event that I should become Qaran's subordinate, what manner of compensation should I expect, I wonder?"

"All the privileges of a follower of Ialdabaoth."

The silence dragged out.

"And as an expression of gratitude, you may also resume lordship over the territories of Dailam. What is your response?"

"Must I answer now?"

"By all means."

An acerbic smile surfaced on Narses's face.

"Well, then. Go back and tell that dog Qaran this: 'Finish that rotten meat yourself. Narses finds it most unappetizing!'"

As soon as he had spoken, Narses swiftly leapt back. Too late, six furious blades came rushing at him. As it was six against one, the knights were surely confident in their victory. But that, too, lasted only for a moment.

The floorboards swung open, revealing a square area spanning about three gaz⁹. Howls of fury and dismay trailed behind the knights as they toppled deep into the ground beneath. There arose the sound of violent splashing

⁹ ~3 m

and clattering armor. Apparently a pitfall had been dug out there and filled with water.

“Fools. Did you think I would not have made measures for entertaining discourteous or uninvited guests?”

Narses turned his back on them. A storm of curses hurled up from the shadowy depths, but Narses did not even spare them a glance as he called for Arslan and Dariun to come back down from the ceiling.

As Dariun walked in, he peeped into the darkness of the pit and said, “Those bastards can’t crawl back up, can they?”

“Not to worry. It’s about seven gaz from the surface of the water to the floor here. As long as they don’t hail from some clan of newts, they shan’t be climbing out any time soon. That said, whatever shall we do with these fellows?”

“If it’s true Uncle has been killed, the bastards are of a feather with my sworn enemies. For that — they shall pay.”

Dariun’s voice trembled dangerously. Narses made a contemplative gesture.

“Now, hold on there. Murder isn’t going to put any food on the table. Let’s think of something a little more useful.”

“Will they not drown?”

“Your Highness, there is no need for concern. The water is not even a gaz deep. As long as they don’t wish it, they shall most certainly not drown.”

At that moment, the youth Elam interrupted.

“Lord Narses, breakfast has been ready for some time now. What should we do?”

“Ah, I’d completely forgotten.”

Narses's mouth stretched into a broad grin, as if he found this all quite amusing.

"First, let's go fill our stomachs, shall we? We can deal with those rude fellows anytime, but there is, as they say, a proper time for repast!"

Whether this was a sign of audacity or of remarkable composure, or nothing but a simple matter of frivolity, his reasoning was difficult to argue against.

At any rate, they proceeded to breakfast. Arslan thought to help Elam in preparing the meal. It just didn't seem right to sit around doing nothing while a boy his own age busied about. But Elam rejected Arslan's proposal in polite terms, then bluntly excused himself. The implication, more or less, was that the prince would probably end up more hindrance than help.

In the end, Arslan directed all his attention into eating, but could not help but obsess over his own shortcomings regardless. Ever since the previous day, he had done nothing but accept help and support from other people, or to put it another way, it seemed he hadn't done a thing for anyone else...

Narses suddenly picked up his emptied plate. With a flick of his wrist, he sent the plate flying right into the face of the knight who was just about to crawl out of the pit onto the floor. There was an angry, agonized groan, followed by the sound of armor crashing into water. Just as they'd finally made it out of the pit to the surface by lifting each other up on their shoulders, they were forced to fall right back to where they started.

"Your efforts are appreciated, but I'm afraid you'll just have to try again," said Narses with his wicked tongue.

"Lord Narses, please don't abuse the dishes."

"Oh, sorry, Elam, sorry."

Scolded thus by his youthful *retak*, Narses rubbed the back of his neck in apologetic shame. It seemed that even for a man who did whatever he

damn well pleased, there were occasions when he, too, could only meekly lower his head to another.

“Lord Dariun, it doesn’t seem you’ve touched much of the food. Should I make something else for you?”

“No, Elam, it’s fine. This is enough.”

All of a sudden Narses turned cross.

“No need to do anything for the likes of him. No thanks to this scoundrel, we must go searching for a new refuge now.”

“Then why don’t you just cut it out with all this talk of giving up on the world and...”

“Quiet, you traitor. You’ve no right to fuss over my peaceful lifestyle.”

Seeing that Narses had turned a deaf ear to whatever he might say, and indeed seemed to want to give him a piece of his own mind instead, Dariun simply lifted his broad shoulders in a shrug. That he so easily held his tongue was likely because he was busy thinking of how to interrogate the soldiers in the pit regarding his uncle’s death.

Arslan set down his soup spoon.

“Narses, will this do? I, too, beg you: please join Dariun in aiding me.”

“You are much too kind. However...”

“Then how about this? In exchange for your loyalty, I shall compensate you accordingly.”

“By compensation I suppose you mean something like the dinars your lord father bestowed upon me?”

“No. I do not believe money could buy your loyalty.”

“Rank, then? *Framatar*, perhaps?”

Narses's only reaction seemed to be boredom. Written plainly across his entire face was the sentiment, *Do I really look like the kind of man who can be bribed with wealth or position?*

“That’s not it. When I have expelled the Lusitanian barbarians and become the king of Pars, I shall welcome you, Sir Narses, as my official court artist. How does that sound?”

Narses gaped at the prince. This had certainly fallen outside his expectations. A few beats of silence passed before he broke out in low, merry laughter. It was as if something inside him had been removed or chased away.

“I like it. And how!”

After muttering to himself for a bit, Narses cast a triumphant glance at his friend.

“How about it? Did you hear that, Dariun? His Highness’s pronouncement is the perfect example of what they call a ruler’s magnamity. What a world of difference his broad-mindedness is, compared to one who lives his life wretchedly devoid of art!”

“Just drop it. Even if it is a wretched life, at least it’s one that doesn’t have anything to do with the likes of your so-called art.”

As barbed tongue met barbed tongue, Dariun turned to look at his prince.

“Your Highness, if one such as Narses becomes the official court artist, Parsian culture is doomed to degenerate. To make this man a scribe or a minister shows a ruler’s discernment, but to make him court artist of all things...”

“Isn’t it all right, Dariun? Rather than allow some famed Lusitanian artist depict the manner of my death, I should rather have Narses illustrate the circumstances of my life. Do you not agree?”

Once more Dariun fell silent. Narses clapped his hands together in glee.

“Your Highness, it seems Dariun is saying that as much as he dislikes the idea of dying, he dislikes the idea of me drawing his portrait even more! For that alone I would love to accept this assignment, but...”

His joking manner vanished, replaced with grave consideration.

“I suppose it’s true I cannot simply stand by and watch as the Lusitanian armies trample my country underfoot. Perhaps I have no choice but to put forth some effort, but still, it is as I mentioned last night: to King Andragoras, my name is taboo. Even though it is more than possible that Your Highness shall be incurring displeasure on my account, is this still acceptable?”

“Of course.”

“Understood. Then I shall aid Your Highness, reluctant as I am to play straight into the hands of that blackguard Dariun...”

Narses laughed as if everything was settled. The youth Elam prostrated himself before his master.

“You’ll take me along too, won’t you, Lord Narses?”

“... Mm,” answered Narses, a little too quickly, evidently reluctant to make an immediate decision. “I’ve an acquaintance in the port city of Gilan. I’d meant to entrust you to him.”

This acquaintance was the mercantile shipowner of about ten sailing vessels; even if the Lusitanian army’s invasion were to reach so far, those vessels could still set sail and escape across the sea to other lands. A letter would be provided when he went, along with enough money to cover travel and living expenses — all of this Narses explained, but Elam refused it all, begging to stay by his Lord Narses’s side.

In the end, Narses yielded and agreed to take Elam along, in part because both Arslan and Dariun were glad to count the young *retak* among their

allies. Elam was an earnest youth who could surely be put to use somehow or another, and his skill with both bow and *acinaces*¹⁰ alike was not shabby. Furthermore, for Arslan, it was an opportunity to make a friend of the same age whom he would have never met at court.

Given these various considerations, it was not long before they all came to an understanding.

¹⁰ short sword



2. Mount Bashur (v)

By the time the knights serving Qaran finally succeeded in crawling out of the pit, each of them soiled and dripping with water, blood, mud, and humiliation, the sun had just about hit high noon. Of course, Arslan and his party of four were long gone, as were the seven horses the knights had come on. They collapsed onto the floor.

Before long, an angry curse erupted from the blood-smeared lips of the knight whose face had been struck by Narses's plate.

"Damn! Escaped, have they?"

"Lord Qaran's got men stationed unfailingly along every route leading from the mountains to the plains. Had he not made such considerations, what kind of a strategist or Marzban would he be? Just you watch! We'll spit on their corpses before the day's over!"

"They must have confidence in breaking through the encirclement, no? Whatever you say, it's Dariun and Narses!" one of the company replied gloomily. Having been so splendidly taken advantage of already, his thoughts inclined towards pessimism.

After rampaging through the room in retaliation, those undeservedly titled knights filed back down the mountain trail. Arslan and the others, hiding in a cave on the mountain, received the report of this from Elam.

"Tough for them. Descending the trail in full armor and on foot, it'll probably take them the rest of the day just to reach the base. Well, let's pray for their sake that they don't run into any bears or wolves, eh?"

Narses explained the situation to Arslan and Dariun. Were they to also descend the mountain right away, they would certainly be caught in a blockade. Better to hole up in this cave for the time being and raise doubt in the enemy. Only then would Narses put his strategy into play.

"At this point what I want to say is that it's all thanks to Dariun's meddling that Qaran's people have surrounded the mountains. But the fact is, no

matter what, a blockade was inevitable. Let's think of a way to take advantage, shall we?" said Narses, who actually seemed to be enjoying himself. Arslan asked what he meant to do, but received no concrete response.

"Have the enemy forces gather right where we want them. That is the very first step of what we call military strategy."

No matter how much military power one might possess, said Narses, to achieve victory without expending said power or doing the impossible was the whole point of strategy.

Arslan attempted a mild rebuttal.

"But in order to save me, Dariun broke through an entire army on his own."

"*That* is a matter of individual valor."

As he offered this pithy remark, Narses winked at Dariun. Dariun remained silent, his only response a faint, wry smile.

"A warrior of Dariun's caliber is not even one in a thousand. That, of course, is where his value lies. But anyone who commands an army must base his standard on the weakest of his soldiers and construct a strategy that shall lead to victory even under such conditions. So too is it for one who calls himself ruler of a nation. Supposing his is the most incompetent of commanders, to avoid defeat at enemy hands he must even work out stratagems that involve no fighting at all."

Narses's voice brimmed with passion. *Sooner or later, Arslan thought, he would have given up on the hermit's life regardless of my interference.*

"Regretful as it is to put in such terms, to be enthralled by one's own military power while underestimating enemies and thus neglecting strategical considerations, what recourse is left when in a single moment the entire situation goes to pieces? The tragedy of Atropatene could be said to be a perfect example of this."

Arslan could only nod. At the plains of Atropatene he had witnessed it all with his own eyes: just how bravely the knights of Pars fought — as well as how futile their efforts were in the end.

“From since before his accession, King Andragoras has never once suffered a military defeat. And so, in his conceit, no matter what manner of problem he encounters, his solution is to use military force. That which cannot be solved through battle, then, he would avoid. As much as he enjoyed taking the heads of enemy generals on the battlefield, he cared not one whit about the internal hypocrisies and injustices of the kingdom...”

Narses's eyes were entirely devoid of humor.

“Your Highness, should I at any time feel that you, as King Andragoras's successor, show no inclination to do better in this regard, I shall relinquish the position of court artist.”

What Narses was saying was that a retainer had the right to abandon his lord; however, it had been just three years ago when he had done precisely that. This was no mere bluff. Arslan nodded feelingly. Regarding the governance of his father the king, the prince was not at all without his own views. With a slight smile, Narses called out to his friend, who had been staring at his sword in stony silence.

“Dariun, even if Qaran shows his face, you'd better not kill him! There's no mistaking it: for whatever reason, he's aware of some outrageously dirty details, eh? We absolutely must hear them from the man himself.”

“Dirty details?” demanded sharp-eared Arslan. Narses had no choice but to laugh it off.

“Indeed. Truly outrageous matters. Nevertheless, whatever those matters may be, I cannot even begin to guess at right now.”

Nodding, Arslan surveyed the interior of the cave. It was spacious enough to accommodate four people and eleven horses with ease; the winding entryway prevented passersby from seeing inside. Though at first glance

one assumed it was a conveniently positioned natural formation, it turned out that Narses and Elam had tunneled it out themselves.

“One never knows what might happen, after all. As a rule, I maintain several such hiding places at any given time,” explained Narses. On being questioned if there were perchance any other entrances or exits, the response was a cool nod. Along with the pit in the cottage, everything displayed what a meticulous sort of man this was.

Arslan could not help but feel that he had acquired a most excellent ally, vastly incomparable to himself in both age and ability. Nothing could be more reassuring than this, and yet his thoughts strayed to even more terrifying heights. Inadequate though he himself might be, Arslan now had no choice but to become someone worthy of the loyalty of the likes of Dariun and Narses.

Chapter 3: The Capital Ablaze

3. The Capital Ablaze (i)

The sun sinks, casting the western horizon in gold.

In an instant, the clear blue skies deepen to dusk; flocks of birds streak away from their formations, returning to their nests. Oranges and ears of wheat flush amber across the plains. The eternally snowcapped peaks stretching far to the east and north reflect the light of the setting sun, dazzling the eyes of everyone on the road. Travelers both mounted and on foot bustle along paths shadowed by elm, cypress, and poplar, hurrying to reach the gates of Ecbatana before they close for the night.

... Such was the typical scene of an autumn sunset in Pars. But now, smoke rose dark from the burnt fields, the roads were littered with the corpses of slaughtered peasantry, and the air was rife with the smell of blood.

Following the devastating loss at Atropatene, the Parsian capital of Ecbatana had been surrounded by Lusitanian forces.

Ecbatana served not only as the royal capital of Pars, but also as the most vital stop along the entire Great Continental Road. Caravans from countries far and wide assembled here — silks, ceramics, paper, and tea from Serica; jades and rubies from the Principality of Farhaal; horses from the Kingdom of Turan; ivory, leather handicrafts, and bronzes from Sindhura; olive oil, wool, and wine from the Kingdom of Maryam; rugs from the Kingdom of Misr — all these miscellaneous goods giving rise to a teeming hotspot of trade.

Aside from Parsian, the lingua franca of the Great Continental Road, dozens of other languages formed a medley among the people, horses, camels, and donkeys milling about the paved streets. Inside the taverns, golden-haired Maryamian women, dark-haired Sindhuran women, and beauties from all the nations vied with each other in terms of allure, and guests were served with famed wines from all over the world. Serican conjurers, Turanian stunt riders, and Misri magicians entertained the

masses with their clever tricks, accompanied by Farhaali musicians on flute. Thus had Ecbatana flourished for the past three hundred years.

But now, the crowds of travelers dwindled, the figure of Shah Andragoras was absent from his throne, and ominous clouds overshadowed the capital.

The walls of Ecbatana measured 1.6 farsangs¹¹ east to west, 1.2 farsangs¹² north to south, 12 gaz¹³ in height, and 7 gaz¹⁴ in thickness. Each of its nine gates was defended by iron double doors. Even under siege from the great armies of Misr the previous year, they had not so much as quivered.

“But back then, within these walls stood King Andragoras. Now...”

Although the two Marzbans Saam and Garhasp were present, with the king’s whereabouts unknown and only Tahmineh in charge, the people of the city grew increasingly uneasy.

Suddenly, there was a strange occurrence. Heading toward the front ranks of the besieging Lusitanians, there appeared an uncovered horsecart guarded by about ten soldiers. Another pair of figures rode on top besides the driver. As the taller figure in the back was gradually identified beneath the darkening skies, the Parsian troops were shaken.

It was Shapur, one of the Marzbans of Pars. Two thick thongs encircled his neck, and his hands were likewise bound behind his back. Blood and grime smeared his entire body, but especially horrific were the wounds on his brow and lower right, gaping ever wider as blood oozed incessantly from beneath the dressing. The Parsian soldiers cried out upon seeing the famed Marzban in such a terrible state.

¹¹ ~8 km

¹² ~6 km

¹³ ~12 m

¹⁴ ~7 m

“Hear me, o infidels of the city, who know no fear of God!” someone roared in heavily accented Parsian. All the soldiers on the walls directed their attention to the little black-robed man standing beside Shapur.

“I am a priest who serves the one true god Ialdabaoth — the Archbishop and Grand Inquisitor Bodin! To convey the will of God to ye infidels have I come. Through this infidel’s flesh shall I convey all!”

Bodin eyed the mortally injured Parsian warrior without mercy.

“First I shall chop off the little toe of this knave’s left foot.”

There was the sound of smacking lips.

“Next shall be his ring toe, then his middle toe... when I have finished with his left foot, I shall continue with his right, and then with his hands. I shall make all the infidels of the city realize the fate that awaits those who defy God!”

All the Parsian soldiers standing on the city walls cursed the priest’s brutality, but what angered Bodin were the shouts of censure from the ranks of his own allies.

He uttered, in a soft but perfectly clear voice, “Godforsaken fools!”

The archbishop glared at his allies, as if to stave off any criticism with his black-robed chest, and yelled out in Lusitanian.

“This knave is an infidel. A demon worshipper who holds no faith in the one true god Ialdabaoth, one who has turned away from the light, a beast who is cursed to dwell in darkness! To take pity on an infidel is the same as turning your back on God!”

At this point, the bloody, mudstained Marzban’s eyes blazed alight, and he opened his mouth.

“A bastard like you has no right to denounce my faith!” spat Shapur. He did not understand Lusitanian, but just by seeing the priest’s wrathful state he could guess at the gist of whatever was being said.

“Kill me at once! If your god is truly a savior, then let him send me to hell or wherever he pleases. And from there I shall watch as your god and your country alike are consumed by your own cruelty!”

The archbishop jumped up and beat Shapur viciously across the mouth with the staff in his hand. Unsettling noises could be heard as the latter’s lips were torn, his teeth shattered, his blood splattering into the air.

“Damned heathen! Godforsaken infidel!”

Amid this cursing, Shapur’s face was struck a second time, and the staff snapped. In all likelihood his cheekbones had been smashed in as well. Even so, Shapur opened his stained red mouth and called out.

“Oh people of Ecbatana! Should you have pity, then shoot me! There is no more saving me now. I would rather die by the arrows of my own people than be tortured to death by Lusitanian barbarians!”

He was unable to finish his speech. The archbishop leaped up and raised a great shout, and two Lusitanian soldiers rushed up, one stabbing his sword through Shapur’s leg and the other flaying his chest. Cries of rage and sympathy echoed from the walls of Ecbatana, but no one seemed to possess enough skill to come to the aid of the unfortunate warrior.

At that moment, a swift soft whistle passed by everyone’s ears. Lusitanians and Parsians alike looked up. From atop the walls of Ecbatana an arrow came flying and found its mark between Shapur’s eyes, forever releasing him from his suffering.

Cheers resounded. Considering the distance between Shapur and the city walls, it must have taken an archer of great strength to slay him in a single shot. From the Lusitanian ranks flew forth several dozen arrows, each aimed at a shadowy figure loitering atop a corner of the ramparts. But not a single one reached the walls, much less hit their target.

All eyes focused on that single point, raising quite a stir of both praise and curiosity. The one who had shot the original arrow was a single young man. He was no armored soldier. Despite the bow in his hand and the sword on his hip, he was wearing an embroidered hat and a similarly embroidered tunic, dressed just like some young vagabond. An *oud* lute was propped by his feet. Two soldiers hurried toward the young man and called out to him as they neared.

“The Queen Consort requests your presence. She wishes to reward the one who relieved the brave Shapur from his suffering.”

“Oh... I suppose I’m not to be interrogated for murder?”

In the young man’s voice echoed the faintest hint of derision.

3. *The Capital Ablaze (ii)*

The queen consort Tahmineh was waiting in the audience room for the heroic nameless archer. To the left and right of the throne she was supported by the principal retainers who yet remained in the capital — the prime minister Husrav and the Marzbans Garshasp and Saam.

The queen looked younger than her thirty-six years, or to be more precise, hers was an ageless beauty. Her raven hair, jet-black eyes, and ivory skin glimmered all the more for the jewels and silks adorning her.

On a rug ten gaz before the throne, a young man knelt down in reverence. The queen studied him with great interest.

“By what name art thou known?”

The young man lifted his face and replied to the queen’s query in a singsong voice, “Giv they call me, Your Majesty. A wandering minstrel by profession.”

This young man named Giv looked to be about twenty-two or twenty-three. His hair was rich and dark as wine, and his eyes were the deepest of blues. The ladies-in-waiting whispered and sighed, admiring his long, lithe

build and fine, delicate beauty. But his expression as he stared back at the queen was incredibly brazen. Along with his earlier display of archery, it was hard to imagine that he was just a man who wandered the world plying his trade as a musician.

The queen inclined her head. The light of the lanterns seemed to sway with her movement.

“A minstrel, thou sayest. Then, pray tell, what manner of instrument dost thou play?”

“I play the *oud*¹⁵ Your Majesty. Other than that, I can either flute or sing; I am a poet and a dancer as well. I’m not bad with the *barbat*¹⁶ either.” He continued shamelessly, “If I might add, my technique with bow, sword, and spear is also a cut above the rest.”

Marzban Saam furrowed his brow while Garshasp scoffed. For two valorous Mardan-level warriors, this could only come across as a bunch of hot air.

“I too witnessed thy skill at archery from the west tower. Thou didst rescue faithful Shapur from his suffering. For that I must thank thee.”

“I am truly honored.”

Despite his words, it was clear from the way the young man looked at the queen that he expected some other reward in addition to her gratitude.

It might have been a look of worship, or perhaps even longing. Faced with the indescribably beguiling beauty of the queen consort Tahmineh, any young man would harbor such cheap sentiment, and likewise Tahmineh was used to being the subject of such. However, that was not the case here. His expression was not only one of brazen insolence, but seemed to regard the queen of an entire nation as one might judge any ordinary woman, and

¹⁵ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cSC95AiLIM0>

¹⁶ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UDYsDzphlIU>

furthermore displayed dissatisfaction at being showered with mere praise, as well as a demand for some further form of recompense.

It was at this point that one of ladies-in-waiting standing in attendance at either side of the queen stepped forth and raised her voice in shrill protest.

“Please pardon my interruption. Your Majesty, your humble servant recognizes this individual. He is a most outrageous man.”

The lady stabbed an accusatory finger at this “vagabond minstrel.”

“This man cannot be trusted. He is a charlatan who deceived me.”

“Deceived thee? How so?”

“Allow your servant to confront this man, and it shall be known.”

Upon obtaining the queen’s permission, the lady glared at Giv and berated him.

“You are a prince of the State of Sistan, disguised as a minstrel while traveling about various nations in order to undertake training as a warrior — did you not tell me this just the night before?”

“I did.”

“But now you claim to Her Majesty the queen that you are just a minstrel. Is that not a lie!?” shrieked the lady. Giv, unaffected, rubbed at his jaw as he looked back at her.

“Not with the intention of pulling the wool over your eyes did I speak thus! That was my dream, a dream you shared with me for a single night. And when the darkness of night surrendered to the light of dawn, that dream vanished like dew upon grass and leaf. Nothing but lovely memory remains now.”

These could be described as lines no one could possibly stomach, but recited in Giv's musical tones they sounded like the most natural thing in the world. It was really quite incredible.

"Come, is it not foolish to shred such a lovely dream with the wretched blade of reality? If only you had understood, the dream would have transformed into memory, all the more sweet and beautiful for it, coloring and enriching the rest of your life. Forcing everything to adhere to a pragmatic philosophy of profit and loss is uncouth. There is no need to pursue such a barren path."

Giv had basically wrung every last drop out of this lady-in-waiting. Having left her with no possible counter, he turned to the queen.

"Sistan is the name of an ancient nation that no longer exists in this world, and thus is not something that should trouble a single soul. Rather, one cannot help but marvel: are women all over the world truly so weak to the word 'prince'? No matter how a sincere a lover she might have, a woman will toss him aside just for a strange vagabond who claims to be a king's son. Truly, such shallow women are suited only for equally shallow dreams."

He was rather impudently dodging the point, but when it came to this young man named Giv, what was truly deceptive was the refined, princely mien he had been graced with. That, far more than the reality, lay in perfect accordance with the fantasies of most young women.

"Of thy eloquence I am now well aware. Thy archery, too, I have already witnessed. Now it should be time to display the skills of thy original vocation."

Queen Tahmineh waved her hand slightly, and her ladies carried in a *barbat* made of gold. Giv accepted it and confidently began to strum.

Even if his technique was not perfect, of those present, not a single person could tell. To the mesmerized courtiers, the sound of his playing possessed an elegant lyricism, and to the women in particular every note seemed to be steeped in sensuality.

After a single song, the women greeted the beautiful minstrel with fervent applause. The men followed, somewhat more reluctantly.

Queen Tahmineh commanded the chamberlain to award Giv two hundred dinars. One hundred for his archery, and one hundred for his music, she declared. Giv dipped his head respectfully, but in his heart he decried the queen as an unexpectedly stingy bitch. He'd been expecting a reward closer to five hundred dinars, at least. At this point the queen spoke.

"For the crime of misleading my handmaiden, some amount was deducted."

With that, Giv could only lower his head.



3. The Capital Ablaze (iii)

At the walls in the far reaches of the capital where the sound of Giv's *barbat* could not reach, fire and sword continued to conduct a symphony of slaughter. The Lusitanians who had been momentarily daunted by their hostage's death resumed their assault on the walls, and the Parsians as well met them in battle from the ramparts. On seeing the approach of the Lusitanians' siege towers, a single soldier rushed to report to Marzban Saam.

"It's them! Those are the towers from which they shot fire arrows and shamed our troops!"

"That sort of child's play?"

With a cluck of his tongue, Saam ordered the soldiers to fill bags of sheepskin with oil. Lining up shields to block the onslaught of arrows from the towers, they took advantage of a break in action to launch the bags from catapults. The bags hit the towers, and oil spilled out from the torn stitches, drenching the soldiers on top.

"Release the fire arrows!"

Right on command, hundreds of fiery arrows colored the sky in red streaks. Not a single thing obstructed the view from the walls to the towers.

The Lusitanian siege towers transformed into towers of flame. The Lusitanian soldiers, bodies engulfed by fire, howled as they tumbled to the ground; soon afterwards, the towers themselves collapsed as well.

Having lost their towers, the Lusitanians leaned scaling ladders one after another against the walls and began to climb. In turn, the Parsians on the walls released a barrage of arrows upon their enemies' heads, showered boiling oil on them before loosing fire arrows, and every now and then launched heavy rocks via catapult to crush the Lusitanian soldiers. The occasional Lusitanian did manage to reach the top, but was each and every one surrounded by the defending Persian soldiers and slain.

At this point the seige of Ecbatana had already lasted ten days, but the Lusitanians had been unable to progress a single step into the city. The Lusitanians, having already lost fifty thousand of their number at the Battle of Atropatene, perhaps realized the foolishness of a direct assault through force alone and chose to resort at last to psychological tactics.

On the fifth day of the eleventh month, more than a hundred heads were lined up on a platform at the forefront of the Lusitanian ranks. “Surrender, or share their fate!” — a simple threat, but upon seeing such faces as had been familiar to them in life, the audience was struck no small blow.

The queen consort Tahmineh turned a pale face to Marzban Saam, who had come to the palace to make his report. “Surely not, surely not His Majesty....”

“No, my queen. His Majesty’s was not witnessed among them. Only the Eran, Lord Vahriz, and the Marzbans Manuchehr and Hayir...”

Saam spoke through gritted teeth. To behold, in such a manner, the heads of men with whom he had once ridden to battle and shared drinks together, one could not possibly remain unfazed.

“Saam! Best to open the gates and sound a charge! What else is the cavalry for? We must not let these Lusitanian barbarians continue as they please,” proposed Marzban Garshasp.

“There is no need for panic. We number ten thousand within these walls, and our provisions and weaponry are both more than sufficient. If we wait for reinforcements to arrive from the eastern border, with their support we can engage the Lusitanians out there in a pincer attack and demolish them in a single morning. Is there, then, any need for us to launch a premature attack?”

As the two men in charge of the city’s military affairs, Garshasp and Saam often butted heads. Garshasp favored swift action and resolution; Saam favored battles of endurance. Furthermore, when the Lusitanians outside the city had incited the *ghulam* in the city to action with promises of emancipation, Garshasp supported methods of force to suppress the slaves,

while Saam opposed him, insisting that such actions would only further raise their ire and lay the grounds for greater unrest.

“How many times must I tell you? No reason to panic. There is still Keshvad. Bahman as well. They will surely lead troops to our aid.”

“When?”

Terse though it was, Garshasp’s response was filled to the brim with animosity. Nor did Saam feel any urge to answer him. Even if Keshvad and the others stationed at the eastern borders turned back toward the capital immediately upon receiving news of the defeat at Atropatene, it would take them no less than a month to arrive. Besides, he and Saam must now set aside these military matters to deal with a far more urgent quandary.

“Neither the status of His Majesty the king nor that of His Royal Highness the crown prince is known. Whom should we look to for leadership in the battle ahead of us?”

Garshasp spoke thus: “If by some mad chance something has happened to both of them, what shall become of the Kingdom of Pars?”

“When the time comes, we shall have no choice but to crown the queen consort Tahmineh and have her rule the country as Queen Regnant.”

“Tsk...” Garshasp clucked his tongue. “If such a thing comes to pass, no doubt the people of Badakhshan will rejoice. The consort of the Prince of Badakhshan becomes Queen Regnant of Pars! In the end, is it not Badakhshan who has the last laugh?”

“Don’t quibble over ancient history. Whatever she may have been in the past, she is at present none other than the queen consort of our kingdom. Other than her, who else can possibly be suitable for the position?”

Even as they spoke, the Lusitanians’ attack continued. In particular, the shouting directed at the *ghulam* in the city increased relentlessly.

“O oppressed of the city! Mankind was not meant to be enslaved. All are equal in the eyes of Ialdabaoth. Whether king or knight or peasant, all alike are disciples of God. For how long do you intend to groan under the weight of tyranny? Redeem your dignity and break off your chains!”

“What nonsense. Aren’t you bastards the ones who are oppressing us?”

As Garshasp muttered unhappily to himself, an urgent report arrived.

“The slaves have set fire to the Great Temple! They beat the priests to death with their chains and intend to welcome the Lusitanians through the west gate!”

Garshasp was at that time directing the defense of the north gate, but immediately entrusted command to his subordinate and rode alone to the west gate. Amid a swirl of flame and smoke clashed a skirmishing mob of slaves and soldiers.

“Defend the gates! Don’t let them be opened!”

As Garshasp flew to the gates on horseback, the slaves, bearing torches and sticks, at first made as if to run. But on noticing that Garshasp was by himself, they swarmed forward again. It seemed they meant to drag him from his mount.

Garshasp’s sword slashed left and right from atop his horse in flurries of pale light. Bright blood leaped from the ground in response as the corpses of slaves began to litter the stone pavement. Crying out in despair, the slaves attempted to flee, this time for real, only to find themselves surrounded by Saam and his arriving men. Thus were the gates barely secured.

“Garshasp! Is killing slaves something to be proud of?” spat a disgusted Saam.

Garshasp lost his temper. “They are not slaves, but insurgents!”

“Wielding nothing but sticks?”

“Within their hearts, they carried swords!”

Confronted with this sharp rebuttal, Saam shut his mouth. But as he watched the slaves being whipped back into place and dragged off, he spoke again.

“Look at their eyes, Garshasp. You may have killed a dozen insurgents, but in exchange you have given birth to a thousand more.”

Saam’s prognosis hit the mark.

The very next day, not far from the north gate, the slaves who had been imprisoned there in a small cell revolted.

Unable to put up with these successive slave riots any longer, Marzban Saam sought audience with Queen Tahmineh and offered exhaustive advice on how to ameliorate the situation.

“There is no longer any other choice. Your Majesty, I beg you: emancipate all the slaves in the city, raise them to *azat*, and offer them compensation and arms. If this is not done, the impregnability of the royal capital shall become little more than a fanciful illusion.”

The queen’s slender brows knit together in consternation.

“It is not that I do not understand thy suggestion, Lord Saam. However, the *wispühran*, *wuzurgan*, *azadan*, *azat*, and *ghulam* form the cornerstones of Parsian society. Wert thou to disturb the very foundations of the nation for naught but a momentary security, upon the return of His Majesty the king no excuse or apology should suffice.”

Saam heaved a sigh at the queen’s obstinacy.

“That is indeed true. But with all due respect, Your Majesty, those so-called foundations are, even at this very moment, jeopardizing the capital. Who, after all, would fight for a country that keeps him under bondage? The enemies laying siege to us have promised these slaves exactly what we cannot grant them. Even if that sort of promise can hardly be anything

trustworthy, from the perspective of slaves who have lost hope in their present circumstances, believing in such a promise is no longer unreasonable.”

“I understand. I shall consider it.”

As the queen offered no further commitment, Saam was forced to withdraw.

And so the situation continued to worsen.

To the minstrel Giv, who had been bestowed a room in the palace, it was as if the fiery chaos of battle outside wasn’t any of his business at all. He indulged in a life of luxury, fine dining, and general indolence, until one night, he was summoned to the offices of the prime minister Husrav.

The prime minister, who, due to a bad stomach, looked as scrawny as an impoverished commoner, greeted the young minstrel with an obsequious smile.

“I rather wonder if, as it seems to me, your wits are not just as impressive as your archery.”

“So I’ve been told since I was a kid.”

Giv’s blithe acceptance of this flattery left the prime minister Husrav at a loss for words. His gaze roved about the detail of the mural on the walls. Then, with the manner of having made some sort of discovery, he invited Giv to sit. Well aware that he had the upper hand, the young minstrel settled down without the slightest hint of reserve.

“Now, then. There’s something I’d like to discuss with you. Given your indubitable cleverness, I suppose I can rely on you?”

Giv did not respond immediately. He fixed his gaze upon the minister’s face, every last one of his senses probing the air about him. He could feel

the metallic aura of blade and armor. If he refused the minister's proposal, his opponent wouldn't be just one single fully armored knight. Besides, he was currently unarmed. If it came down to it, there was always the option of using the minister as a human shield, but this withered little official seemed to be sharper than he looked.

"So? How about it? Will you accept?"

"Let's see... given a proper reason and a proper reward, and not to mention the possibility of success, then of course I'll accept, but..."

"To ensure the continuation of the Kingdom of Pars: that alone is the reason. The reward, I believe, shall be satisfactory."

"If that's the case, Your Excellency, then I shall do my humble best."

Evidently gratified, Husrav nodded.

"Is that so? When she hears your response, I'm sure Her Majesty the queen shall also be pleased."

"Her Majesty!?"

"Summoning you here was not my idea. It was the will of Her Majesty. A sign of the great faith she places in you."

"My, my. To place her faith in a vagabond minstrel such as myself — I'm quite simply overcome."

Neither party was being entirely sincere. Only one as stupid as a pig would believe in the courtesies of the powerful and the privileged.

"In brief, Giv, I would like you to escort Her Majesty the queen through a secret passage and take her somewhere safe outside the city."

"Her Majesty is going to escape the capital?"

"That's right."

“The royal capital is titled thus because of the presence of the king and his consort. The moment either one is absent, Ecbatana shall no longer be worthy of her good name.”

Whatever sarcasm was present in his words, the minister did not seem to notice, wrapped as it was in pleasant, silvery tones.

“If the queen successfully escapes, and joins elsewhere with His Majesty the king in safety, thus establishing once more the royal authority of Pars, those generals and soldiers and subjects who yet remain loyal will surely gather there. Ecbatana or not, there is no need to fuss and cling over such a thing.”

All in all, well said.

“There are a million citizens in Ecbatana. What about *their* lives?”

The moment Giv pointed this out, the minister instantly revealed his displeasure. As such talk was no longer mere sarcasm, but outright censure, the minister could hardly *not* notice.

“That has nothing to do with you. Most importantly, the royal family must be protected. It is simply impossible to take into account every single last commoner out there.”

“... That’s it. That’s exactly why innocent citizens have no choice but to fend for themselves. Just like me.”

As the minister was no mindreader, he was unable to hear the muttering in Giv’s heart. That he had served as the prime minister of Pars for sixteen years without incident was simply because he adroitly anticipated the will of Andragoras, whose authority was absolute, without ever getting on his bad side, and possessed exceptionally keen judgment regarding both internal and external court intrigues.

All decisions were left to Andragoras. All Husrav had to do was realize those decisions accordingly. Though he did also enrich his personal coffers every now and then, compared to most other nobles and priests his

offenses were not outrageous; and besides, it was probably taken for granted that a high-ranking official would take advantage of his position, and that one in a position of power would receive certain allowances from the commonfolk. He had no reason to explain himself to the likes of some lowly vagabond minstrel such as Giv.

One hundred dinars were bestowed upon Giv. Giv accepted them with a great show of reverence. No need, after all, to turn down that which was freely given.

3. The Capital Ablaze (iv)

Giv was walking along a long, spacious underground aqueduct that led outside the city. Torches blazed all along the brick and stone-enforced waterway, and the flowing water reached halfway to Giv's knees. Giv and the black-veiled woman he was guiding had already been traipsing down the dark passage for about an hour.

This underground aqueduct existed for the royal family to escape in times of emergency, or so Giv had been informed by the prime minister. It was like that in all times and places. Royalty and powerful officials always had an escape route set aside for their use alone, forbidden to the commonfolk. Even the knowledge of their existence was not permitted. While the commoners were slaughtered by enemy soldiers, their corpses piling into a wall, the king and his clan fled alone to safety. Was this not rather contrary? Without any nation to speak of, it was the king who'd be in trouble, not the people.

“No matter how you look at it, they’re selling me short.”

Giv mocked both himself and the minister. As if the queen consort, unaccompanied by a single retainer or lady-in-waiting, would really entrust her fate to some wandering minstrel. That kind of thing happened only in the fanciful imaginings of a troubadour.

“You must be tired. Shall we rest a bit?”

The woman veiled in black shook her head wordlessly. She probably hadn't any confidence that her voice would tally, so to speak.

"Don't push yourself, now. It's gotta be tough just pretending to be Her Majesty."

After a long pause, a resigned voice broke the silence. It was, as it turned out, someone else's.

"How did you realize?"

"The smell."

Giv pointed a finger at his shapely nose and displayed a knowing grin.

"Yer body odor's not a thing like Her Majesty's. Even if you use the same perfume."

To that, the lady had no response.

"Using you as a double while that fibbing queen consort makes her getaway. It's that sort of arrangement, isn't it."

The lady's lips remained sealed.

"That's what highborn people are like. Assuming that it's perfectly natural for others to serve them. Taking it for granted that others will sacrifice themselves for their sake. Not knowing a damn thing about gratitude. Conceited creatures they are, see."

"I shan't allow you to slander Her Majesty."

"Good grief..."

"No matter what Her Majesty and the Lord Minister think, I hear and obey loyally. All I have to do is fulfill my own duty."

"Now that's what they call a slave mentality."

Giv spoke boldly and utterly without mercy.

“It’s because of servile types like you that the highborn can go on acting as they please. While they wallow in their own complacency, you folks are the ones who end up suffering. That kind of duty sure as hell ain’t my thing.”

“In that case, do you mean to say that you cannot take me any further?”

“Well, the agreement was for me to serve as the queen consort’s escort, not the escort of some court lady playing pretend. Seeing as I’ve brought you this far anyway, you’ve got no cause for complaint, eh?”

Giv’s lithe body suddenly leaned back as the lady unsheathed her *acinaces* with a single slash. As he lightly dodged her second strike as well, a wry smile surfaced.

“Aw, cut that out. Faithless fellow I may be, but I’d never turn my blade on a pretty woman.”

In an instant, that smile went the way of dispersing mist. Even as she attacked with her shortsword the second time, the lady had also kneed Giv in the groin, leaving him speechless.

With Giv left unable to even fire one last retort, the lady ran off, water splashing in her wake. She probably intended to return to court to inform them of the situation. Wrong direction, Giv wanted to say, but couldn’t make a sound.

After running for a while, the lady lost her way and came to a stop beneath the frail light of a torch. Soon enough, a shriek escaped her, for she had spotted the outline of a strange figure all too close at hand.

“Well, well. What’s this? Does Her Glorious Majesty of Pars mean to forget the sufferings of her people and escape alone?”

The flames of the torch reflected off a silver mask, dissipating into little bursts of light.

“What a fitting pair she makes with that villain Andragoras! One deserts his men and flees the battlefield; the other abandons the capital and its people to burrow away underground. Where have you misplaced the responsibilities of those who sit the throne?”

In the shadows behind the ominously masked man lurked several dozen more figures. Amid her fear, the lady recollected her duty.

“Who art thou?”

This simple but grim query was repelled by chilling laughter from the silver mask.

“One who shall exact true justice upon Pars.”

The voice resounded against the walls and the water before dissolving into the darkness.

His laughter had been cold, but utterly without humor. The man of the silver mask, at least, held no doubt whatsoever about his quest for justice.

Though her body was seized up in terror, the lady, still attempting to flee, kicked up her feet in the water. But when her gaze passed over a familiar face, her mouth opened in a cry.

“Marzban Qaran, milord! What are you doing in this kind of place...”

“*Milord?*”

As he caught her words, the masked man’s suspicions transformed at once into certainty.

“Wench! You’re not the queen!”

The man’s hand tore off the veil, revealing the face of a young woman who, though comely, was far from any match for Tahmineh. Staring into that terror-paled face, he of the silver mask soon understood all he needed to know.

“That doddering Vahriz was one matter... Everywhere I turn, all these loyalist fools getting in my way!”

When the sound of grinding teeth filtered through the mouth slit of the silver mask, the surrounding knights ducked their heads as if in distaste.

The lady’s face twitched in fear, then in the clutch of overwhelming agony. The man of the silver mask closed his hands around the lady’s neck with merciless strength. From the slits around his eyes surged a reddish light that was difficult to behold.

Even when the lady’s flailing arms drooped from midair, the masked man’s hands continued to press. Only when the dull snap of bone was heard did the man finally release the unfortunate lady.

The lady’s body dropped into the shallows like a log, splashing droplets onto the silver mask like countless gems.

Without a word, the man of the silver mask moved as if to step out of the water. It looked, too, as if he had laid to rest all his rage, hatred, and disappointment in the waters alongside the lady.

“Hold it!”

A sharp voice arrested the silver mask’s steps. As one the company turned to see a young man whose appearance, bathed in the wavering light of the torches as he advanced step after step toward them, could only be described as elegant.

“What’s the point of offing a beauty, even if she wasn’t particularly stunning? If you’d let her live, maybe she’d have had a change of heart and let me be her kept man.”

No one but the “vagabond minstrel” Giv would possibly say such a thing. In the unfriendly silence that ensued, he coolly swept forward and tossed his own cloak over the lady’s half-submerged body.

“How ’bout giving me a peek at your face, ladykiller?”

He received no response.

“Or maybe that is your actual face, ‘coz it’s not blood that flows through your veins but quicksilver?”

“All of you: squash this jabbering mosquito. I’m going after the real queen.”

Having tossed out those words, the silver mask’s towering figure turned around. Qaran followed behind, while five of the knights stood forth to block Giv’s way.

There was the sound of blades unsheathing in succession. Five swords flashed before Giv in a ring. No doubt sensing their determination, Giv backed up against the wall of the waterway to avoid being surrounded. The moment he brandished his own sword, the first attack sliced down at him through the air.

The walls and the ceiling of the underground aqueduct echoed again and again with the clash of blades. The water about their legs splashed and soaked, and the light of the torches sizzled down to a sickly color.

“One down!”

The counting voice was accompanied by an impressively conspicuous spray of water mixed with red.

Every time the torchlight flashed off Giv’s blade, blood and water formed an inverted waterfall. If the man of the silver mask were present at this scene, there was surely no way he could disregard this display of swordsmanship. Even so, by the time the fifth knight had fallen to the flash of his blade, Giv had also frittered away a considerable amount of time and energy.

They’d not been shabby opponents.

“Alrighty, off to rescue that liar of a queen, or should I just stop now that I’ve done my dinars’ worth?”

Giv stroked his chin as he deliberated, and in the end chose a third path. He'd follow the aqueduct back down to the palace and take advantage of the chaos to help himself to the treasury. As long as it was just a matter of himself, he was confident that he could protect himself no matter what transpired.

Just as he was walking off, Giv came to a stop again. He searched the bodies of the Lusitanians he'd just cut down and came away with several small woolen pouches in hand. After opening them to confirm the presence of Lusitanian coin, he shamelessly performed a gesture of tribute.

"The dead have no need of such things. I'll put them to good use, so thanks!"

The dead of course had no reply for him, but Giv didn't seem to mind either. He strode over the corpses and started heading back down the darkness of the aqueduct to return to Ecbatana.

3. The Capital Ablaze (v)

Even as the incident at the palace unfolded, Marzban Saam was directing the defenses at the gates. That night, the Lusitanian army's onslaught was particularly aggressive. They scaled the walls under a rain of arrows, swept away by wave after wave of attack, only to reform and resume their assault each time.

Of course, this was all happening in accordance with the man of the silver mask's movements in the underground aqueducts. They had no intentions of allowing the Persian army even the slightest hint of what was transpiring.

As the bodies of their dead piled up at the foot of the walls, the Lusitanians simply erected ladders on top of the corpses and continued their assault.

By the time the palace lit ablaze, half the night had already passed. Witnessing this sight from atop the walls, Saam handed command of the defenses to a subordinate and descended alone to jump on a horse and gallop toward the palace.

Smoke engulfed the palace. The sound of clashing blades echoed everywhere. Saam leapt from his horse and dispatched a pair of slow-reacting assailants, only to freeze, not quite shocked, upon the appearance of a third.

“You — You... Qaran!”

Bloodstained sword still in hand, Saam stared aghast at his former comrade. But only for a moment. Had not the half-dead troops who’d straggled back from Atropatene said as much? It was because of Qaran playing the turncoat that their side had suffered such great defeat, they’d claimed. Though he’d not believed it at the time, the answer as to who, between accuser and accused, was in the right, stood now before his very eyes!

Saam raised his arm in a gust of wind.

Blades clashed. Sparks danced in the dimness. In the next moment, the two men’s positions had swapped.

Qaran proved the faster in their second exchange. Saam’s blade sliced through the night wind, too late for attack, but managing at least a successful parry, thus saving his own neck.

Through the smoke and the screams of the courtiers, their fierce encounter continued. Qaran’s helm was sent flying; Saam’s armor cracked. Their blades crossed at an awkward angle; under those close constraints, their glares suddenly locked. How many blows had they exchanged by now? Neither was keeping count.

“Qaran — you — why have you sold out your own country?”

“I have my reasons, but the likes of you would never understand.”

“Oh, but of course. How could anyone?!?”

Their blades glanced aside. The men danced apart. Saam panicked, realizing that he had been completely surrounded by Qaran’s people —

though he had not yet noticed that behind him now stood the man of the silver mask, with lance in hand. Conversely, Qaran grew in confidence.

“Surrender, Saam! If you convert to the faith of Ialdabaoth, they’ll let you preserve that miserable life of yours, along with your position!”

“How absurd — for a dog to be muttering on and on about the likes of human status!”

Even as he cursed at him, Saam thrust his blade toward Qaran’s face. Qaran twisted to avoid the attack. In that moment, Saam, not one to miss his chance, took advantage of the space that had opened up and slipped through. With a single strike he cut down the knights lined up before him like a row of candles, leaving not a single trace of human hindrance. It seemed that Saam had successfully broken through the encirclement.

It was then that the man of the silver mask thrust forth the lance he was wielding. That long and heavy weapon speared past Saam’s armor, through his back, and out his chest. While he faltered, stunned speechless, another pair of knights caught up and stabbed their blades into him.

For a time Saam stood there, his torso pierced through with a lance and two swords. Then, with a heavy clatter, he crashed to the stone pavement.

“... What a pity.”

Silver Mask’s murmur, swept away by the night wind, could not have been heard by anyone present; perhaps, then, it was because he shared the same sentiment that Qaran responded with a nod of his own. Gazing upon the fallen body of his former comrade, his expression wavered ever so slightly, and he knelt, feeling for Saam’s pulse.

“My word. Even like this, he still clings to life!”

Lusitanian soldiers poured through the gates Qaran had opened. The people of Ecbatana screamed and cried in their attempt to escape, only to

be kicked down by horses, their skulls shattered as enemy riders stabbed lances through their backs. It made no difference if they were women or children. Every killed heathen brought them one step closer to Heaven.

Straining desperately all the while to stem the torrent of people and horses was Garshasp. As he screamed rebukes at the subordinates swarming at his feet, he brandished his sword and set his horse before the invaders in attempt to block their passage.

However, in that very moment, a Lusitanian lance lunged forth and pierced the chest of his mount. With a sharp cry, the horse bucked off its rider and toppled to the ground.

The thrown Garshasp had just managed to lift himself halfway from the ground when Lusitanian blades fell upon him from above, behind, before, and to the sides. The proud Marzban was now nothing but a bloody lump of meat.

The crisp night breeze carried the stench of blood all the way to the commercial districts of Ecbatana.

Drunk on blood and alcohol, the Lusitanian soldiers dragged the bodies of women along as they trampled all over the corpses of the citizenry.

From a corner of the palace, the man of the silver mask surveyed the bloodstained streets.

“Enjoy today’s victory while you can, Lusitanian barbarians.”

Though they were supposedly his allies, the Lusitanians were not spared any contempt in Silver Mask’s muttering.

“The more you mongrels indulge in such bloody, vulgar revelry, the more the people of Pars shall seek a savior. A hero, to chase you from this land and restore the glory of the kingdom. When that time comes, you bastards shall pay for the crimes of this day.”

Below him, yet another group of Lusitanian soldiers ran past. No doubt they were planning to loot the Great Temple. Those who did not fear the authority of the Parsian king naturally did not fear the power of their gods either. Moreover, they believed it a just cause to destroy such a stronghold of idolatry in the name of their own God. At long last, the doors of the Great Temple were destroyed, and they all barged in at once.

To their left and right were arrayed the statues of various divinities of the Parsian pantheon.

Crowned in gold and draped in a robe of beaver skin was the goddess of all waters, Anahita, she who was also known as the goddess of birth.

The white horse with a golden mane was an avatar of the rain god Tishtrya.

He with the wings of a giant crow in place of hands was the god of victory Verethragna.

Goddess of beauty and luck was the virginal guardian deity, shining Ashi.

And last but not least: he of the thousand ears, and of the ten thousand eyes, who knows of all in the heavens and all among men. Mithra, god of the covenant and of loyalty, worshiped also as the god of war.

Around these statues the Lusitanian soldiers shouted and gathered, pulling them down from their platforms one after another. The statues were made of varying materials. Some were carved from marble; others had been cast in bronze and gilded in gold.

The marble figures shattered upon hitting the ground. The bronzes were stripped of their gold by blade and by hand. “Heathen gods!” “Evil demons!” proclaimed the soldiers, along with other utterances of their faith, even as they hoarded gold leafing to their bosoms and spat on the faces of the statues.

“Pigs will be pigs, I suppose.”

The sound of cold mocking laughter brought their movements to a sudden halt. The figure of a single young Parsian stood amid the fallen statues.

“Cruelly rendering the statues of such beautiful goddesses into such a sorry state — does that not indicate your so-called aesthetic deficiency? Is that not proof of just how barbaric you filthy lot are?”

The Lusitanian soldiers looked at each other. Among them, one who understood Parsian as the lingua franca of the Great Continental Road, shouted angrily in return.

“What are you blathering on about? You idol-worshipping heretic! With the advent of the one true god Ialdabaoth at the end of days, all you accursed heathens shall fall into the very depths of hell for the rest of eternity. You won’t even have a chance for regret then!”

“Who’d wanna live in a heaven rife with Lusitanian pigs like you anyway?”

Even as the youth — Giv — spat out that venomous retort, he shifted so that he could draw his sword at any time. Lusitanian soldiers began to surround him, swords bristling in their hands.

“Lovely Ashi, Lady of Luck, who guards the springs and moistens the earth; hear me, o goddess!”

As if dedicating a verse to a beauty, Giv raised his face to the skies.

“Here stands one of your adherents, fine of face and blessed in form, about to be slain by lowly Lusitanian pigs. If you have a heart, I beg thee, grant me thy protection!”

Those who understood Parsian were infuriated; even those who did not understand grew upset. One, who seemed like the soldiers’ captain, brandished a broadsword in attack.

Giv’s blade painted a silvery crescent as the Lusitanian captain danced close, like a flicker of moonlight, flinging his sword high into the night

sky. The captain, so summarily defeated, was still standing helpless and dumbfounded as Giv dove straight to his side.

Twisting the captain's right arm with his left hand, Giv leveled his own sword at the stunned Lusitanians with his free hand and began to descend a set of stone stairs, step by step.

The Lusitanian soldiers, exchanging panicked and uneasy glances, shrank back, cringing. Already they realized that this pretty-faced lad, so facetious in speech and conduct, was in fact a swordsman of awe-inspiring prowess. Better that their captain should be killed, perhaps, than to suffer equally overwhelming defeat at his hands.

"Don't you dare move, ya damn barbarians."

Giv continued to threaten the Lusitanians in a half-singing tone.

"Take one more step, and your captain'll find himself a head shorter. Those of you who understand human should translate for your fellow pigs, by the way," he continued, saying pretty much whatever he wanted. "Now then, oh lovely goddess Ashi. I have managed to sweep away a little of your nuisances. And now I plan to make these pigs repent for their sins. Please gladly accept these goods that they plundered from the Parsian populace and the palace as their offerings to you."

Giv raised his voice.

"That pig over there. Mantle. Off. Now collect all the loot your buddies have gathered. If you've got any complaints, do remember what I said about your captain's height..."

Seeing that it made no difference whether they liked it or not, the utterly defeated Lusitanians did not even think of disobeying.

Five minutes later, Giv had forced the captain, bearing all the loot bundled in the mantle, down into the underground waterways. Outside the thick door, the Lusitanians belatedly burst into an uproar, but by then they weren't even a minor annoyance.

Upon reaching a suitable location, Giv knocked out the captain with the hilt of his blade, set him down against a wall, and shouldered the bundle of loot himself, before eventually resurfacing in the middle of a forest just outside the city. Smoke continued to billow from the capital, as well as in the opposite direction.

Probably the Lusitanians razing yet another village as they continued to pillage and slaughter. By morning, hundreds more “heathen” heads would no doubt be lined up on pikes before the city walls.

“What a pitiful end.”

Burdened with his ill-gotten goods, Giv continued to walk along, considering where he might procure a horse.

“... Thus the hero-king Kai Khosrow seated himself upon a throne of gold; and all the kings across the vast land knelt before him in obeisance; and the Kingdom of Pars was united...”

Giv hummed a verse from the kingdom’s founding epic to himself. From the hard glitter in his eyes, as sharp as starlight reflected off a sword, one could see that his expression had lost its previous merry frivolity.

The fall of Pars was an inevitability. This was a nation built upon the ashes of other nations; that which was born from ash can only return to ash. And yet, even so — watching the Lusitanian barbarians trampling all over the vast lands of Pars, killing and plundering as they pleased, was not something that sat well with him. (His own modest profiting off the situation was another matter entirely.) Somehow or other, those bastards had to be taught a lesson.

Before dawn had broken completely, Giv put the matter of the capital behind him and vanished into the last vestiges of night.



3. The Capital Ablaze (vi)

At present, the palace had become a hunting ground for armor-clad predators.

“Find the queen! Capture her!”

The hollering and heavy footsteps of the trespassing Lusitanians clattered across the mosaic tiling.

Capturing the queen consort Tahmineh may have been the Lusitanian soldiers’ official goal, but in the meantime, they were also busy satisfying their own personal desires. They assaulted the fleeing court ladies, and after killing them seized their necklaces and rings, thus slaking all three of their lusts at once.

No matter how barbarically they acted towards the heathens, their god Ialdabaoth would forgive them. This their clergymen had guaranteed. Their persecution of the heathens was all according to the will of God, and was their duty as His adherents. They had no reason to hesitate. Besides, by doing so they could unleash their own bestial urges...

And so the palace was filled with the raucous laughter of the victors and the desperate wails of the defeated. The magnificent marble halls that had, before King Andragoras’s departure for the front, been filled with such splendor and luxury, transformed into a swamp of blood and disgrace.

The man of the silver mask paced around the palace, alone. His goal, however, was not at all the same as that of the Lusitanian soldiers. Though his leather boots were drenched in blood as he tread across dismembered bodies, he was not moved even in the slightest. No one could hear the muttering hidden behind his mask.

“That woman can’t have expected that Ecbatana would fall so swiftly. She must have intended for that double to draw Lusitanian attention away from her, while she herself would escape only after they let their guard down. If that is the case, there must be some hidden chamber or other secret passage somewhere...”

Silver Mask stopped pacing. One of the heavy curtains that had been sliced in half was wriggling about like a squirming caterpillar. After determining that there were no other Lusitanians going about their business in the vicinity, Silver Mask strode over and ripped away the curtain, revealing a single cowering figure.

It was a middle-aged man dressed in the vesture of a *magpat*, a high priest. Those priestly robes in their gaudy gold and purple did not at all emphasize the greasy man's saintliness, but rather, his worldliness.

“Convert! I'll convert!”

Before Silver Mask could even open his mouth to speak, the priest had already thrown himself to the ground, groveling.

“I shall make my disciples convert as well. Nay, I shall have every single priest in the nation pledge fealty to Ialdabaoth. Thus I beg you — please, spare me!”

With the demeanor of one ignoring the squealing of a pig, the man of the silver mask was just about to walk away when the priest spoke again, his voice at once both unctuous and sly.

“Truth be told — regarding the matter of where Queen Tahmineh has secreted herself away, I may perhaps be of some help.”

Despite wincing at the vicious glance directed at him from the silver mask, the shameless priest proceeded to tell all.

“Now that I have informed you of this, please deal with the matter of my conversion and salvation as you see fit, please, oh please.”

“... Very well. As you wish.”

And thus was the queen consort Tahmineh sold out to her enemy by this high priest, in exchange for all manner of privileges and favors.

When she, along with several of her ladies, was dragged out from a secret room beneath the wine cellar, the queen consort stared down the silver mask with cool regality. So too did the man return her gaze.

“That’s right, this is the woman. She with whom Andragoras was so obsessed, the consort of Badakhshan...”

His voice was like stagnant water drawn from the deepest wells of memory. Though Tahmineh’s expression did not falter, her cheeks paled noticeably.

“You haven’t changed at all since that time. Only by nourishing yourself with the lives and fates of countless men can such beauty have been preserved, oh monster!”

The unimaginable depths of hatred shrouded within his insult brought chills to all those present.

Two flags waved at the fore of Ecbatana. One was the national flag of Lusitania, and the other was the standard of Ialdabaoth. The two differed only in the color of their fields; their designs were otherwise identical. In the center was a silver emblem formed by two short horizontal stripes crossed with a longer vertical stripe. The border, too, was lined in silver. The national standard was fielded in red, while the religious standard was black. Red to signify earthly authority; black to represent the glory of heaven.

The Lusitanian generals conversed while gazing at the flags.

“Seems that fellow with the silver mask’s captured Queen Tahmineh.”

“Oh? Capturing both of the royal couple all by his lonesome, huh? What an impressive achievement.”

“That man, has he perhaps truly devoted himself from the bottom of his heart to our Kingdom of Lusitania after all?”

“Hmph, if that were the case, then why has he not yet revealed to the Parsians that their king is now his captive?”

Voices expressing disbelief, suspicion, and distaste surged forth.

“If the damn fools knew their own king had been captured, it would be a great blow to their morale. Those Persian heathens would completely lose their will to resist. Just like that, the entire city would capitulate. So why hasn’t he acted? It’s the same with that secret underground waterway. Sneaking in with only himself and his own men, while making us engage in a brute force attack!”

“I bet he just wants all the credit to himself. Not endearing at all, but understandable, at least.”

“I suppose it’s something like that. However, one still can’t help but wonder if he’s concealing some sort of plot.”

... Though the man of the silver mask could not hear any of this, he probably wouldn’t have paid them any heed even if he were to hear. Silver Mask was just then taking the captured queen consort Tahmineh to the Lusitanian king, Innocentius VII. They were at the audience chamber, a spacious room from which the blood and the dead had just been hurriedly cleared away.

King Innocentius VII of Lusitania looked like no mighty conqueror or fiendish invader. He was certainly tall and well-built, but he had a bad complexion, and his skin lacked the sheen of vitality. Passion emanated from his eyes, but that passion was not directed toward anything of the earth.

He could be described as the very model of devoutness as a follower of Ialdabaoth. He did not drink, nor did he consume meat. He worshiped thrice daily, and had done so for thirty years without fail. When he was ten, he had fallen seriously ill, and at the time vowed thus: until he had destroyed every last heathen nation in the land and erected temples to Ialdabaoth in all their capitals, he would never marry. Even now, at forty years of age, he remained unwed.

“All obscene texts that contradict the holy scriptures shall be burned; every last heathen shall be wiped off the face of the earth.”

Such had been his lifelong creed. Fifteen years he'd ruled now, and in this time he had killed around three million heathens — infants included — and burned around a million volumes of texts on witchcraft, atheism, and foreign culture. Scholars who insisted “There is no such thing as God” had their tongues extracted. Lovers caught in clandestine meetings at temples of worship were burned bright red, impaled on giant iron skewers so that “the two would become one flesh.”

Should such a fanatical king ever cross paths with a heathen queen, the only possible outcome was surely the cruelest of executions. However, his vassals' expectations all fell short of the mark.

Upon beholding Tahmineh's visage, the Lusitanian king fell silent for some time. Gradually, the evidence of profound impact began to suffuse his face, and before long, his entire body was in a shiver.

Several of his vassals exchanged glances. As the shadow of misfortune fell across their hearts, they gazed in constrained silence at their own king and the queen of their destroyed enemy.

Chapter 4: Beasts and Beauties

4. Beasts and Beauties (i)

When King Innocentius VII first set out from his true motherland, the full military strength of the Lusitanian army was said to consist of a cavalry of 58,000, an infantry of 307,000, and a navy of 35,000, for a total of 400,000. Of those, 32,000 had been lost during the subjugation of Maryam, and disregarding the over 50,000 lost at Atropatene, 25,000 had been killed in the siege of Ecbatana, cutting their numbers down to less than 300,000.

When the storm of slaughter and pillaging settled, the chief generals of the Lusitanian army had no choice but to begin working out long term strategies for subjugating the rest of the Parsian kingdom. It was at this time that a single message arrived, and sent them all into such a frenzy that had not been seen since they first departed from Lusitania.

In this message, their king Innocentius VII proclaimed his desire to wed Queen Tahmineh of Pars.

“Just how old is the Parsian queen anyway?”

“Well, she should be in her late thirties or so. Of an age not unsuitable to His Majesty, at least.”

“That’s hardly the issue here. That woman is the queen consort of another kingdom, not to mention a heathen. Should not such a marriage be utterly unthinkable to begin with?”

Flustered by this unexpected development, the generals gathered at once before the king to persuade him of the foolhardiness of his desire.

“Tahmineh, queen of Pars, is a most inauspicious woman. All men involved with her ultimately meet with doom.”

“As long as she is no heathen, as long as she is not the wife of another man, Your Majesty has the authority to make any woman your queen. Take your pick from the finest beauties of Lusitania.”

The king fell into a sulk. He'd known from the start it was an impossible desire. Upon seeing the king's demeanor, one general pressed on loudly without thinking.

"Prince Kayumars of Badakhshan, the prince's minister, King Osroes V of Pars, and Andragoras the Third. These unfortunate men, bewitched by Tahmineh's beauty, all ended in demise. Even knowing this, does Your Majesty wish to become the fifth?"

King Innocentius, as if struck, remained silent. The king had always been an obtuse one, and within him now superstitious fear seemed to do battle with extreme fixation. At last, the king said, "However, those unfortunate men were every last one of them heathens disfavored by Ialdabaoth, were they not? It may well be that God Himself set her these trials. Perhaps it is fated for her to become a devout Ialdabaothan wife."

And that was that. The generals were unable to protest. Clucking their tongues in dismay at the king's obsessive sophistry, they retreated for the moment to await the next suitable opportunity for remonstrance.

Gold, diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, pearls, amethysts, topaz, jade, ivory... the mountain of valuables in the Parsian treasury dazzled the Lusitanians' eyes. How could they have triumphed over such a powerful and wealthy nation, they wondered? Even if all of Lusitania were to be wrung dry, such a fortune could not be amassed. This was the reason for their aggressive territorial expansion.

The horses for the exclusive use of the king and his consort were perfumed with saffron upon their manes and heads. Scented torches illuminated the paths of the courtyards as well; the torches had all been dabbed in musk.

The palace treasury had not been targeted by looting Lusitanian soldiers. This was because, unlike the other rooms of the palace or the homes of the citizenry, the treasury was off-limits, and anyone who attempted to would be sentenced to death by fire.

During the king's initial inspection of the treasury, the generals accompanying him cried out in wonder.

"The wealth of the Parsians surpasses even rumor!"

"All belongs to God! By no means shall this fall into the hands of the likes of you."

The king's genuine piety caused his generals much displeasure.

Of course their *official* reason for abandoning their destitute, dry and rocky homeland to invade these otherwise untroubled heathen nations was to sweep away every last existing heathen for the glory of Ialdabaoth. However, already Atropatene had been won, and the capital Ecbatana destroyed, and the glory of God achieved. Was it not now the turn for mortals to benefit?

Everything goes to God, the king declared in his blind faith, but in the end the ones who managed these commodities for God were the "holy men" as represented by Bodin. And what could they claim to have contributed to these victories and conquests?

This along with the matter of Queen Tahmineh caused resentment against the king to fester among the generals, who pinned their hopes more and more on another royal, Duke Guiscard.

As the king's younger brother, Guiscard was possessed of more titles than he could count: Duke, Knight Commander, General, Lord Governor, and so on and so forth. He stood about as tall as his brother the king, but his figure was far more youthful and defined, and his gaze and movements both brimmed with vigor. Unlike his brother, who looked only to God and to the clergy, he cared far more about earthly and human affairs. By planning carefully around such matters and hoarding material wealth, only then could there be a life considered worth living for him.

King Innocentius, or "The Possessed" as his little brother called him, had never had the ability to conduct a campaign across even the western third of the continent to begin with. Presented with the question, "What shall we

do for supplies, oh brother mine?”, he was the type of man who would reply, “God shall rain manna from the heavens upon His followers.”

In the end, the one who organized that army of 400,000, made arrangements for supplies, prepared the naval fleet, plotted their course, and directed combat, leading their generals to victory, was Duke Guiscard himself. All his royal brother did was pray to God for victory, without commanding even a single soldier. All the more incredible was that he did not even ride his own horse, but had come all this way borne on carriages and litters.

It is I who am the true king of Lusitania; so too was it I who actualized the conquest of Pars, thought Guiscard, as he expressed his sympathies for the disaffected generals who’d come running to him.

“I understand your feelings well. I too have felt this way for some time — that my brother the king is overly generous to those clergymen who offer him naught but lip service, while overlooking such meritorious veterans as yourselves...”

The royal prince Guiscard’s voice was low, but impassioned. He was fanning the flames of the generals’ discontent in large part for the sake of his own ambitions, but what he spoke was no lie. That rabble-rouser constantly lurking at the king’s side, Archbishop Bodin, was a particular source of indignation.

“Your Royal Highness, take for instance that cur Bodin. Subjugating heathens, eradicating heretics, hunting witches — all just an excuse to torture and slaughter those who are helpless to resist. Not even once has he stood upon the battlefield and crossed blades with the enemy himself. Why is a man like that allowed all the wealth and power he desires, even as the rest of us toil and risk our very lives?”

“There was that incident from before, too. Heathen though he may have been, that Shapur was nonetheless a hero worthy of respect. Had his hands been free, a man of Bodin’s caliber would have been crushed like a chick. Making a scene with all that hollering and flailing about with his rod made him as unsightly as some crazed monkey.”

The generals' ire over these various matters, along with their overall agitation, served as a most valuable source of information for Guiscard. It did get rather tedious, but to just bluntly dismiss their concerns was out of the question.

Upon hearing that his brother had become enamored of the Parsian queen, Guiscard's initial reaction was to laugh coldly to himself.

"That brother of mine, enthralled by a woman? Apparently it's impossible for a man to lead a life devoted solely to God after all. Still, no matter what, better a young maiden than one already matured..."

Curiosity thus roused, Guiscard took a peek at the captive Queen Tahmineh, and found that he could no longer laugh at his brother. It wasn't just a matter of physical beauty; it was as if Tahmineh herself emanated some great power, a beguiling charisma that affected all who came into her presence.

This time, as Guiscard brooded in private, there came someone to advise him. This was the man unofficially in charge of operations under Guiscard, the one responsible for guiding their expeditionary forces, a man whose true likeness even Guiscard himself did not know. This man, who never removed his silver mask in the presence of others, warned the Duke in a goading manner, "Should Your Royal Highness accomplish all that you intend, not just one but any number of beautiful women shall become yours for the picking. What reason is there for you to dwell on this woman of a fallen nation, who belongs to another?"

"... Mm, I suppose that's true."

As if shaking off any lingering regrets, Guiscard nodded and gulped down a goblet of wine before heading off to see his brother the king. When it came down to it, the greatest difference between him and his brother was probably his ability to give up.

4. Beasts and Beauties (ii)

Even one such as Innocentius VII, who had used God and fate to justify himself to his generals, probably did not dare appeal directly to God regarding this matter. He had been fretting all by himself in the bedchamber of Andragoras, from which all traces of blood had been wiped away.

Since he abstained completely from alcohol, the silver goblet set on the Serican-imported red sandalwood table was filled with nothing but sugared water. This was one of the things Guiscard found tiresome about his older brother. Nevertheless, reining in his feelings, Guiscard expressed his approval regarding the marriage between his brother and Tahmineh.

“Oh, is that so? You approve?”

Innocentius VII’s sallow face was suffused with joy.

“Of course I approve. Albeit not just for your sake, brother mine. If the queen of Pars were to wed the king of Lusitania, it would strengthen the relations between these two nations of ours.”

“Indeed, it is as thou sayest.”

King Innocentius took the powerful hands of his brother, only five years his junior, into his own plump and feeble grip.

“Unfortunate though it is that much blood has been spilled, that which is already past needs must be forgotten. The people of Lusitania and the people of Pars must join hands in the name of the one true god, and together build a kingdom of heaven upon earth. For that purpose, my marriage to Tahmineh is certainly of utmost necessity.”

Guiscard gaped in amazement at how promptly his brother had managed to twist everything into his own self-justification. Joining hands was all well and good. But to the Parsians who had been brought to such bitter grief, was “forgetting the past” something so easily accomplished? Such were the

thoughts he harbored, but what he said out loud was something else entirely.

“Alas, brother mine, there are still two or three minor impediments to your blessed marriage.”

Hearing him say so, the Lusitanian king’s anxious eyes swiveled over at once.

“And what might those be, my beloved little brother?”

“First and foremost is the archbishop Jean Bodin. As Queen Tahmineh is a heathen, that fussy archbishop shall certainly not accept it. How are we to deal with him?”

“I see; however, this is easily resolved by commanding the archbishop to convert Tahmineh to the faith of Ialdabaoth. Should the archbishop so desire, I shall donate however much he wishes from the Parsian treasury or some such, and if that is still not enough, from our own treasury...”

Cut this shit out already, swore Guiscard inside. That brother of his simply did not comprehend just how many sacrifices they’d made to get their hands on “the Parsian treasury or *some such*.”

Having ended the conversation at a suitable point and taken his leave, Guiscard returned to his own room and downed several cups of wine in succession. It seemed he’d drunk too much sugar water, for he felt sick to the stomach.

It was then that the man of the silver mask appeared, and Guiscard spluttered out the gist of the discussion.

“Well done.”

Silver Mask, commanding the royal prince, whispered poison into his ears.

“If His Majesty the king donates overly much to that Bodin, the dissatisfaction and unrest of the generals shall only grow. And should

Bodin still cleave stubbornly to his doctrine and obstruct the king's marriage, he shall almost certainly incur His Majesty's displeasure. No matter how things progress, Your Highness shall not be at a disadvantage."

"Right, that's good. But even so, my brother just doesn't understand a single damn thing. Countless enemies remain within Pars. It's uncertain how Misr, Sindhura, and Turan shall move next. To say nothing of marriage! If those bastards unite and attack..."

Guiscard clamped his mouth shut. His expression shifted slightly as he glanced at the man of the silver mask. Something seemed to have occurred to him.

"Speaking of which, you sure were a great help at the battle of Atropatene, eh?"

"You flatter me."

"Some say that the unnatural appearance of fog at Atropatene was caused by sorcery."

There was no reply.

"That fog certainly was convenient. No matter what strategies we came up with, if it hadn't been for that fog, we probably wouldn't have defeated the Parsian army."

"Is it not said in the teachings of Ialdabaoth that sorcery cannot overcome the power of God? It must have been divine providence."

"Hm..."

Though he didn't seem entirely satisfied with this, perhaps the wine dulled his persistence, for Guiscard did not pursue the matter further, and the man of the silver mask took his leave.

Silver Mask strode swiftly and without hesitation through the long, confusing corridors of the palace. Paying no heed to the looks of disgust

shot toward him from the Lusitanian soldiers he passed by on his way, he began to mutter to himself as if out of habit.

“When Badakhshan fell, still that woman survived. And now that Pars has fallen, yet again she lives on. However, upon the fall of Lusitania, that shall no longer be the case. When she has gone to the next world, I wonder how that woman plans to face all those men who died for her.”

In an arcade along a spacious cloister that showed signs of recent devastation, the man of the silver mask came to a stop. Qaran, after walking around to confirm no others were present, bowed.

“Qaran, have you not yet captured Andragoras’s brat?”

“My deepest apologies. I ordered my men to expend all their efforts in the search, but still we have been unable to uncover his whereabouts.”

“Have you not grown lax?”

Although this was not at all a strong rebuke, that Qaran grew somber was due to the silver mask’s voice. That voice was once again in its most natural state, a striking contrast to the polite tones he had produced when facing the royal prince Duke Guiscard. Qaran, with something resembling fear to any potential onlooker, bent his waist deeply once more.

“To hear such words, my shame knows no depths. I did not mean to disappoint...”

For a man of his size to be cowering in this manner was most unlike the behavior of a Marzban.

“No, you have done fine. Not the type to be negligent, are you? Come to think of it, Pars is vast. Even the shade of an orange tree is enough to hide a single lone brat. One single lone brat...”

The man of the silver mask trailed off. A brief silence was followed by a brief chuckle. The rays of the setting sun dappled through the leaves of the orange trees in the courtyard, caressing the side of his mask.

... The very next day, a single pale-faced knight, whose pride had suffered deeper wounds than his body, rode forth from Qaran's territories, heading toward his master in Ecbatana.



4. Beasts and Beauties (iii)

“I am truly ashamed for what has transpired. The crown prince Arslan and his fellow fugitives escaped our encirclement and have concealed their current whereabouts.”

Looking down upon the subordinate who had come groveling to him in report, Qaran’s eyes flashed with near murderous fury. He had always treated his men with generosity and fairness, for which reason they had followed him until now. However, this time, Qaran was forced to suppress his urge to kick his groveling subordinate in the head.

“How did the situation turn out like this? Explain to me clearly!”

When Qaran managed at last to school his expression into calmness, quite some time had already passed.

Aware that if he continued babbling excuses, his master’s barely restrained anger would no doubt explode, the subordinate outlined only the essentials.

As Arslan, hiding at Mount Bashur, had not immediately come down from the mountain, Qaran’s men had conducted a search of the mountain itself.

At this time, a single woodcutter showed up to inform them that just the other day, he’d heard the sound of human conversation coming from a cave that should have been uninhabited. The men hiding within were tying messages to pigeons’ feet in order to communicate with their allies outside the mountain. According to him, it seemed they planned to act in concert from within and without, and break through the blockade on the night of the fourteenth that very month.

Qaran’s men, exulting at their good fortune, prepared for the night of the fourteenth. And so — as they slept soundly on the night of the thirteenth, the blockade was broken. Though they sprang up at once to carry out their defense, not a single person could stand against the valiance of Dariun, and their command was all in a jumble, and so in the end the escape succeeded. And to top it all off, a man thought to be Narses told Qaran’s men the

following: *So terribly sorry, but since we were holed up in the mountain with no calendar, we mistook the date...*

“In other words, you were all completely played. That woodcutter was probably paid off by them.”

“Yes...”

“Whether it’s Dariun or Narses, neither can be considered an ordinary man. Did I not mention as much, and tell you to keep that in mind? Useless fools!”

Qaran, revealing his displeasure, angrily upbraided those unreliable men of his. This was proof of his anxiety and unease. If Arslan, accompanied by Dariun and Narses, joined up with the troops of Keshvad deployed at the east and led a charge back to Ecbatana, what would they do then? In any case, the Lusitanian army would be defeated, and wouldn’t the great ambition of *that honored person* then remain unfulfilled?

Though it was not that Qaran did not quail at the name of Dariun, now that things had come to this he had no choice but to make his own move.

In order to request official sanction from Duke Guiscard to deploy troops, Qaran hurried down the hallways, but could not avoid overhearing the voices of the passing Lusitanians.

“Hmph, a traitor putting on such airs...”

“One of the conquered, and not even a convert; but before you know it, he’s become some sorta vital participant in our plans.”

“Looks like selling out your own kind as a heathen’s more of a shortcut to success than giving your life in battle against those very same heathens. Aww, we sure got born into the wrong place.”

They spoke loudly, obviously meaning for Qaran to hear. The Marzban of Pars did not refute them. The humiliation stiffened his face.

The royal prince Duke Guiscard was in the middle of drawing up plans for future territorial divisions and security measures, both for the sake of Lusitania as well as for himself. When Qaran came calling at the former minister's offices that were now allocated to the prince, he was not made to wait long, perhaps because the prince was just then in the mood for a diversion.

Qaran bowed deeply upon entering the room, and begged the royal prince's permission to quash Prince Arslan and his party.

"Arslan is no more than an inexperienced child, but Dariun and Narses are a pair that cannot be underestimated."

"What kind of men are they?"

"Narses was formerly a royal *dibir*. King Andragoras prized his cleverness, but he has now retired to the wilds."

"Hm..."

"As for Dariun, Your Royal Highness is probably already aware of him. He is the man who singlehandedly broke through the Lusitanian ranks, that day at Atropatene..."

For the first time, Guiscard reacted. He threw his peacock quill down onto the desk.

"So he was that knight in black!"

"Indeed..."

"Thanks to that bastard, several of my friends and acquaintances perished in these heathen lands. I'd like to flay him alive!"

Qaran was silent.

"That said, he is undoubtably a man of great valor. In petitioning me, I assume you're confident in your prospects for victory?"

“Somewhat, yes.”

“Is that so? Then go ahead and try. But only if you Parsians can’t end this with your own hands will I be sending the regular Lusitanian troops to clean up after you.”

Guiscard had made calculations of his own. If the Parsian factions were set against each other, Lusitania would not be at a disadvantage. And if the Parsian prince were exterminated by Parsian hands, then the Lusitanians would not have to dirty their own. Besides, in raising his hand against the prince, there would be no more turning back for Qaran.

However his royal brother or Archbishop Bodin might feel about it he couldn’t say, but from the start there had never been any reason to wipe every last Parsian from the earth. Pull a tenth of the Parsians over to their side, and let them govern the remaining ninety percent. Divvying up rule in this manner was to display true wisdom as a conqueror.

A man like Qaran ought to be bled dry and worked to the bone. At the very least, he should be far more useful than Bodin and his ilk. If he wanted to establish his own merit, it was perfectly fine to give him the chance to do so.

Seize the Parsians’ land and *ghulam*, then parcel them out to the Lusitanians. This formed the basis of Guiscard’s plan, but a proactive collaborator like Qaran could not be grouped with the other Parsians. Guiscard intended to recognize Qaran’s right to his own territories, but would most likely be met with opposition from among the Lusitanians.

“This is no jest. Why must the conqueror curry favor with the conquered? Should the spoils of the defeated not go completely to the victors? For this we have paid with our own blood. Who else is there to worry about?”

Those who were greedy and shortsighted would say such things. Moreover, such sorts of people were typically in the majority, and held considerable influence all around the world. If he did not act accordingly with these circumstances, Guiscard would not be able to achieve his true ambitions.

“At any rate, the matter of Prince Arslan is yours to deal with for the time being. Make a good job of it.”

“I am grateful for your kindness.”

“Incidentally, Qaran.”

Guiscard seemed to have an unexpected question. How would the Parsian aristocracy and military command feel if Queen Tahmineh of Pars were to become the wife of the Lusitanian king?

Qaran’s expression blanked as he replied.

“That lady was never Parsian to begin with, but the consort of Badakhshan. Everyone should well remember this.”

“... Hm, I suppose that’s another way of looking at it.”

Guiscard tilted his head doubtfully, but could recall no reason to detain Qaran any further, and so dismissed him with a wave of his hand.

4. Beasts and Beauties (iv)

When the bazaar resumed after the fall of the city, there was a reasonable level of bustle and a fair amount of goods exchanging hands. If not for this, Parsian life would no longer be sustainable.

Among the crowd was a single girl.

With skin the color of wheat, hair like black silk, and equally dark eyes, this tall maiden was quite the beauty. And so, unable to keep his eyes away from her sparkling vitality and intelligence, one of Qaran’s men, a Parsian soldier standing guard over the bazaar, called out to her. Though the girl seemed slightly annoyed, she looked at the mounted ranks passing through the bazaar beside them and inquired whose troops they were.

“Those’re troops under the direct supervision of your Marzban — no, the current Eran, Lord Qaran.”

“I wonder where they are going?”

The girl’s voice was so innocent that the soldier told her all he knew, even as he promised to show her something good — though of course his information wasn’t of much note.

With that, the soldier nonchalantly but forcefully took the girl by her wrist, pulling her away from the bazaar and into a little-used alleyway. Before, he’d been able to do nothing but bite his fingers and stand by as he watched the Lusitanians’ violent savagery. Parsian women ought to belong to Parsian men... The girl struggled against him, but the overly excited soldier seized her head in attempt to pin her down.

The soldier cried out. The cloth wrapped around her head, along with the girl’s hair, had fallen clean off. It was a wig! As the soldier’s shock turned into anger, the tip of an *acinaces* flashed out and pierced his chest. Once the soldier had fallen into the dust, his assailant, like a nimble little bird, hopped into a different alley.

“Ugh, gross.”

The pretty maiden — or rather, the youth dressed as one — spat at the ground unhappily. It was Elam.

At Narses’s request, he’d sneaked into the capital Ecbatana to spy on the movements of the Lusitanian army within. *I implore you, do not attempt anything dangerous*, Narses had insisted, the hypocrisy of which Elam found laughable.

At any rate, he had to report back to Narses.

Elam turned two or three corners before entering the backyard of someone’s home. He removed his girl’s clothes, then put on a set of male clothing that had been laundered and dried. Then he set down five mithqal coppers to cover the use of the girl’s clothing and smeared mud all over his face and clothes.

As he cut through the bazaar once more, Elam could hear the faint shouts of the soldiers raising a clamor over the discovery of their comrade's dead body.

"Qaran's led more than a thousand riders out of the city?"

Narses tilted his head at the report of the youth Elam, who had just returned from the capital. Arslan and company had been moving back and forth between the ruins of various villages sacked by the Lusitanians.

Arslan crossed his arms.

"Sending out this many to capture me is a bit excessive, is it not?"

"It's only a matter of course. Your Highness, they do not know our numbers. Moreover, your cause is just. With you at the lead, it is possible to muster enough strength to resist the Lusitanians. The Lusitanian army is most inconvenienced; even Qaran cannot possibly rest easy."

That made sense, thought Arslan, but he still had his doubts. They should not have any idea of where he was hiding, so how did Qaran intend to find him?

"If I were Qaran, and needed to capture Your Highness as swiftly as possible, I would first ambush a suitable village and burn it down."

"Burn a village?"

Arslan's eyes widened, and Narses, passing Elam a towel as if telling him to go wash his face, explained.

"After that, there are countless methods he can employ. One way is to burn down the village, kill the villagers, then post a warning edict directed at Your Highness. In it he will announce that if Your Highness does not turn yourself in, he shall continue attacking villages and killing innocents.

Though there are various other methods as well, in terms of order this is probably the one he shall try first.”

Arslan sucked in his breath.

“Qaran would go so far? No matter what, he is a warrior.”

“Yes, an exemplary warrior who sold out both king and country.”

Narses’s sarcastic point silenced Arslan. Qaran had already crossed the river to the opposite shore. Likely he no longer felt any need to adhere to such principles as the avoidance of senseless slaughter. Having concluded thus, Arslan broke his silence.

“Narses, do you know which village Qaran will target?”

“I certainly do.”

“How so?”

“By their guidance. All we need to do is follow them. Shall we?”

Arslan nodded forcefully.

When the prince had left to saddle his personal steed, Dariun, who seemed to have been lost in thought as he listened to the previous dialogue, spoke up.

“Qaran is not such a simple man. Mustering troops to leave the capital in broad daylight and all, isn’t his intent to lure His Highness into a trap right from the start?”

“Possibly.”

“If you think so, then why did you not stop him?”

“Oh, Dariun, this is the perfect chance for us to see exactly what that prince of ours is capable of. And how faithfully I look forward to it.”

Dariun blinked, and Narses burst into laughter.

“We must hear directly from Qaran sooner or later anyway, or we shan’t be able to figure out what’s really going on. To capture the *sher*’s cub one must enter the *sher*’s den; sometimes there’s just no avoiding it.”

Dariun raised his brow slightly.

“You — had the prince failed to go save the villages, you would have considered him unworthy as a liege and abandoned him, wouldn’t you?”

No reply came from Narses’s lips. He only laughed wickedly. But his expression was a clear affirmation of his friend’s insight.

4. Beasts and Beauties (v)

The “vagabond minstrel” Giv managed to acquire a horse after escaping from the capital Ecbatana. Although he’d originally intended to purchase one from a farmer in one of the nearby villages, he’d changed his plans upon hearing that the Lusitanian soldiers had taken all the sheep and livestock along with the food, and after crossing blades with a single Lusitanian soldier who seemed to be a messenger of some sort, ended up getting a horse for free. Following up on that, he’d kindly received a purse, along with a belt ornamented with gold: proper recompense for his considerable efforts — or so Giv thought to himself.

For that one particular figure and Giv to cross paths afterwards could not be chalked down to mere coincidence. If one wished to avoid running into Lusitanian soldiers while traveling, one was naturally limited in both timing and possible routes.

When their horses passed, both parties kept their distance, ready to draw blades at any moment — a natural precaution. It was a half-moon night, and they were about seven to eight gaz away from each other, so Giv noticed nothing at first. Only when the direction of the wind changed and a feminine scent wafted to him on the night breeze did he realize that the other party was a woman disguised as a man. From atop his horse, Giv turned back to look.

Though her head was wrapped in silk, from the shadows unraveled a length of glossy jet black hair reaching all the way to her waist. Her eyes were a dark, vivid green, reminiscent of the verdant days of early summer. That Giv could see this was because the woman had also glanced over her shoulder, albeit for an entirely different reason from his. The moment her gaze met Giv's, she urged her horse on and left him behind.

For quite some time, Giv, half-dazed, watched the woman's retreating silhouette beneath the moonlight, but at last he clapped his knees.

"Yup, rare indeed, a fine woman like that. Way younger than that lying queen too."

Giv hurriedly cycled through various calculations. He now had an objective to act toward.

"That beauty's definitely going to be ambushed by scoundrels. If I come to her rescue, it'll only be natural for her to turn grateful and admiring. And then she'll be wanting to thank me however she can, I think. That's how it should turn out. That would be nice. That better be how it turns out."

Having thus decided things in his own favor, Giv set his horse to follow behind the woman at an appropriate distance.

Before long, his chance arrived. Ever since the fall of the capital, Lusitanian soldiers had been running rampant, naturally growing more and more aggressive, gathering together in little bands to kill and loot. Duke Guiscard had posted ordinances warning against the harm of innocent citizens, but the policy was all too often unenforced.

The shadows of seven or eight riders appeared from the line of cypress trees, blocking the woman's path. They shouted at her in Lusitanian, utterly crude phrases, it seemed.

The woman, looking irritated, kicked lightly at her horse's flanks. The horse seemed to be very well trained. Understanding its rider's intent, it began to dash forward before the Lusitanian soldiers could even react. In the blink of an eye, the Lusitanians were left behind by about thirty gaz; by

the time they gave chase, the woman upon her horse had already drawn her bow taut, into the shape of a full moon.

In the next moment, the moonlight itself seemed to form into an arrow and pierce the knight.

From his pierced throat gushed blood and a strangled cry as the knight toppled to the road below.

Having recovered from their momentary shock, the other knights, hollering angrily and waving around their blades, closed in on the woman. No, they attempted to, rather, but the twang of the bow split through the night and yet another rider fell from his saddle through the air into a cloud of dust. Already another arrow had flown forth, and a third rider was lost.

“Can’t let her go on like this.”

Giv spurred his horse toward the road earlier than he had planned. If he dilly-dallied any longer, he’d lose the chance to earn that woman’s gratitude.

The first of the Lusitanian soldiers who turned upon hearing the approach of hoofbeats became his first victim.

The Lusitanian was cut open from his left shoulder to his chest with a single slice of Giv’s blade. Screams and blood sprayed high toward the half moon, and the Lusitanian tumbled from his horse.

The appearance of a new enemy, and moreover one who could not be underestimated, drove the Lusitanian soldiers into a fright. They exchanged a flurry of words in a tongue Giv could not understand, then scattered left and right upon their horses with swords in hand.

Although they meant to close in on Giv from three directions, their intent was foiled by Giv’s swift action. Fresh blood spouted forth in a crescent from the neck of one; another’s head was snapped back from a blow to the nose.

The remaining two were no longer concerned with such things as honor. Without even turning back around, they spurred their horses down the road, escaping into the darkness beyond. Seeing them off with a cold smile, Giv glanced over his shoulder to receive a small shock of his own. For the woman too was already leaving the scene to continue down her way. This was completely different from what he'd predicted.

"Please wait, my lady!" he called after her. But perhaps she didn't hear, or perhaps she planned to ignore him, for the woman did not halt her horse's advance.

"Oh beautiful one...!"

Though this time he called out in a louder voice, the woman still did not react.

"Oh matchless beauty!"

For the first time the woman paused. She glanced back at Giv unhesitatingly. Her graceful profile, illuminated by the moon, carried an expression of utmost serenity.

"Were you calling for me?"

Even Giv was at a loss, and in that brief moment as he tried to settle on a response, the woman continued.

"To call me beautiful is one thing, but there is no reason to call me a matchless beauty..."

Curiously enough, her matter-of-fact acknowledgment of her own attractiveness was not at all off-putting. Giv, somehow or other, cheered up, as he could finally say something suitable to his personality.

"Nay, 'tis not just your pulchritude, your martial prowess as well is truly admirable. Giv I am named, a wandering minstrel with no place to call home; and in my appreciation for beauty, which surpasses even that of

kings and nobles, do I take pride. Now, summoning forth my undernourished muse, I shall compose a verse in praise of your grace.”

The woman did not respond.

“Your figure grows as slender as the cypress, with black hair cut from the night sky, eyes that glitter like the facets of an emerald, and bewitching lips like rose petals touched with morning dew...”

“You lack originality as a bard, don’t you.”

The woman spoke with cool indifference, and Giv scratched his head.

“Well, perhaps it is true I have yet to mature as a poet, but then again, my passion for beauty and justice would not lose even to the great poets of yore. For that very reason did I come to your rescue just now.”

“Although I did find it rather convenient, did you not simply just bide your time for the right moment?”

“How unfair of you to suspect me so. My guardian deity, goddess Ashi, conferred her protection upon you and me and wreaked well-deserved retribution upon those Lusitanian barbarians for their lack of faith. Should we not give praise to such divine justice?”

The woman’s smile seemed bitter. Giv inquired after her name, and she replied quite readily.

“My name is Farangis. I was engaged in service at a temple of Mithra in the Khuzestan region. The High Priestess dispatched me as an envoy to the capital Ecbatana.”

“Oh? Mithra! After Ashi, good old Mithra’s the one I pay most respect to. My lady Farangis and I definitely share a unique bond of destiny, no mistaking it.”

Giv’s flippant words were completely ignored by the beautiful priestess.

“However, I have heard it said that the capital has already fallen. Not wishing to return in failure, I was thinking I must at least find some place to rest the night when those Lusitanian curs appeared.”

“May I ask what business you have at the capital?”

“To locate the crown prince, His Highness Arslan. I have a single query to make of you: might the respectable Sir Minstrel possibly be aware of the whereabouts of His Royal Highness?”

“No, I am not — However, if my lady Farangis means to search, I can lend you my strength if you like. That said, why are you looking for His Highness Arslan anyway?”

“On the occasion of His Highness Arslan’s birth, a donation was made to our temple under his honored name. For this reason, should His Highness ever find himself in need, from among those in service to the temple, one who has dedicated themselves to the martial arts must be sent to help him. Or so was written in the will of the previous High Priestess, who passed away this spring.”

Farangis’s black hair swayed as she shook her head.

“Those who leave such wills never consider what trouble they may cause for the people they leave behind. And so, from among those who met the requirements, it was I who was chosen; however, this was not only because my martial skill was the most excellent among theirs.”

“What do you mean?”

“A woman of talent, who like me is graced with beauty and proficient in arts both scholarly and martial, shall be begrudging by her peers.”

“... I see.”

“Using the fulfillment of the deceased’s will as an excuse, they chased me away from the temple. I wonder if you understand, Sir Minstrel.”

Though he did not doubt what Farangis had said, there was plenty of room left for Giv to use his imagination. Perhaps some lustful priest had approached her and received a harsh, ahem, *rejection*, making it awkward for her to remain at the temple. No matter how martially proficient she was, sending a lone woman on such a mission was simply far too dangerous.

“All the more reason, Lady Farangis, to just toss aside a duty you’re so reluctant to uphold, don’t you think?”

“No, no matter what, I do not approve of the ways of the Lusitanians. I may be an adherent of Mithra, but I feel no need to force my faith upon those who hate it. If they are to be chased out of Pars, I would like to join in.”

Giv nodded forcefully.

“It is exactly as Lady Farangis says. I completely agree.”

“Mere lip service, is that not?”

The raven-haired, green-eyed beauty’s tone was filled with acrimony, but Giv’s reply held no indication of such.

“No, it’s not just lip service. The way those Lusitanians impose their god on other faiths doesn’t sit well with me either. For example, that’d be like claiming only women with golden hair and blue eyes and skin as pale as snow can be beautiful, while refusing to recognize other women as beauties. What somebody thinks is beautiful or what they feel is precious is up to every individual, and shouldn’t be something that can be forced...”

Giv cut short his fervent monologue. This was because he’d noticed that Farangis had shut her eyes and placed a thin little crystal flute at her lips. Though he couldn’t hear anything at all, Giv gazed enchanted at her face, bathed in the light of the half moon, as white as Serican porcelain. Then, Farangis opened her eyes and removed the flute from her lips, and looked upon Giv as if considering him anew.

“... Is that so? Then very well.”

She spoke as if responding to some unheard voice.

“According to the jinn, it seems your loathing of the Lusitanians, at least, is no lie.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Perhaps so.”

There was no civility in Farangis’s voice.

“An infant hears the voices of people, but understands not the meaning of their words. You are the same. You hear the sound of the wind, and yet cannot even hope to comprehend the whispers it carries from the jinn.”

“I get it, so I’m just a baby?”

“Your comprehension is lacking; it seems my example was a bad one. You are far too malicious to be an infant.”

The little crystal flute was caught between Farangis’s white fingers. A tool to call upon the jinn, perhaps.

“At any rate, it seems like you’ve acknowledged my sincerity. How about it, Lady Farangis? Generally speaking, every meeting between one and another is brought about by a thread of fate. Personally, I’d like to travel with you, but...”

“Do as you wish. Provided, however, that like me, you pledge your loyalty to His Highness Arslan...”

“My loyalty is a bit lacking, though for now I’ve got more than plenty for you, Lady Farangis.”

“I have no need of your loyalty.”

“Saying that’s kinda cold, don’t you think? Aren’t my lady Farangis and I in a relationship now?”

“What relationship!?”

Farangis’s raised voice swiftly silenced. Giv shut his mouth too and pricked up his ears. It was the sound of horses from somewhere unknown, beyond the poplar forest by the road. Surging into view upon the night road came the silhouettes of a large cavalry troop riding hard from the direction of the capital, in numbers stretching completely across their field of vision.

“Those’re the troops of Marzban Qaran.”

Besides his, no other Parsian troops would hoist the Lusitanian flag at their fore.

The beautiful priestess muttered daringly as her gaze followed the thunderous hoofbeats and the clouds of dust fading into the distance under the moonlight.

“Perhaps someone among them knows His Highness Arslan’s whereabouts. For that alone, I should go try and see...”



4. Beasts and Beauties (vi)

That day, in broad daylight, one of Qaran's troops burned down a village and threw fifty villagers — though only men — into the fire. They left behind only a single line — “If from now on you continue to harbor Prince Arslan and his cohorts, even women and children shall not be spared!” — along with ashes, hatred, and grief.

For Qaran, there was no longer anything he could do but drink the poison dry. Repeating this sort of massacre again and again in order to corner Arslan and company was the only way he could gain the deepest confidence of the Lusitanian army.

As the sun sank and it came time to set up camp, a single report was received. A man, clinging to the back of a horse, on the brink of death, had been discovered roaming the wilderness. That man confessed that he'd been hired as a porter for Arslan and company, but was caught stealing their belongings; whipped half to death and told that he'd be killed the next day, he had escaped in desperation.

Qaran examined the man's wounds. He considered the possibility that the man might have faked his injuries in order to draw him into a trap. But the countless stripes upon the man's body were genuine. Qaran chose to interrogate the man personally.

“How many travel with Prince Arslan?”

“Just four of 'em.”

“Don't lie, there should be a hundred times that.”

“Tis true, and two of 'em children besides... it's coz of that they hired me to haul their gear.”

“Then, where are the prince and the others headed?”

“Down south, y'see.”

When this brief interrogation reached an end, the man requested a reward for his information. With a nod and a “Very well!”, Qaran suddenly drew his sword from its sheathe and sliced off the man’s head. Qaran spat upon the head as it rolled to the ground.

“Fool, as if I’d fall for such a scheme!”

And so he ordered his troops north, in the opposite direction as the man had indicated. Qaran judged that Narses had commanded the man to come to him as an informant. Even his injuries were a trick made to gain Qaran’s trust.

How little Qaran knew. Stopping by a certain village, Arslan’s party had deliberately picked out a shady man and hired him to carry their luggage. Then, after the beaten man’s figure disappeared in the direction of Qaran’s troops, they changed their route to head from south to north. They then purposely exposed their northward trek for all to see...

This was all according to Narses’s plot. Qaran’s army headed north, entangling themselves in a forested, mountainous region. Moreover, night had already fallen. For such a large troop of cavalry, truly adverse conditions were stacking up one after another.

Past midnight. Narses, having completed his preparations, grinned as he peered out from the forest at Qaran’s troops advancing in single file along the mountain trail. The shrewder the mind, the more easily it danced right into the palm of his hands.

As soon as the enemy troops had passed, he turned back to where he had tethered his horse. Suddenly, his footsteps halted and he stooped low, having sensed the approach of something — or someone.

Narses sprang back. The flat of a blade flashed past, grazing his tunic, scattering several strands into the air.

As he jumped back once more, Narses drew his sword to parry the next silvery attack. Sparks flew at the ear-piercing scrape of metal against metal. The second round was over before it had even started. For both parties had realized the other was not the enemy they had expected, and drawn their blades aside.

“Are you not one of the Lusitanians?”

It was a young woman’s voice, accompanied by the subtle scent of perfume; even Narses was taken by surprise.

“Who are you?”

Upon being asked, Narses immediately offered up his own name: “Narses, a supporter of His Highness Arslan.” His swift response was entirely intuitive.

“My apologies. I am Farangis, an adherent of Mithra, come to offer my strength to His Highness Arslan. I have been shadowing Lord Qaran’s troops all this time.”

“Oh?”

Narses had no jinn to aid him. That he trusted in Farangis was through logic alone. If she were part of Qaran’s faction, all she had to do was shout out to reveal Narses’s location to everyone else.

“You are saying you wish to ally yourself with His Highness Arslan?”

“Indeed.”

Her words lacked emotion, but her voice was musical to the ear.

“Let us cooperate, then. From here, we are to capture the traitor Qaran and bring him before His Highness Arslan.”

“Understood. I have but a single query: how many are currently in service to His Highness Arslan?”

Narses replied nonchalantly to the beautiful woman's question.

"Along with you, that'll make a total of five."

Narses, it seemed, had noticed Giv standing behind her.

Someone or other raised a shout, and now Qaran's troops were all astir. At first just one, then dozens of fingers pointed toward the cliff. Exposed in the pale light of the half moon was Arslan himself, seated upon a horse, surveying the troops arrayed below.

"It's Prince Arslan! Kill him! His head's worth 100,000 dinars!"

Whether such a price was too high or not, Arslan could not judge, but to the knights under Qaran's command, it was an amount worth more than their own lives.

With shouts of greed and excitement, the riders spurred on their horses and began to gallop up the slope. Even for the virile Parsian horses, sustaining such a charge was no easy feat, and the troop formation immediately collapsed. The moment the first horse struggled wheezing onto the cliff, Arslan's sword stabbed through the chest of its rider. The tip of the blade thrust right through his back; there was a sound of impact as the crossguard struck against a button on his padded vest.

Arslan pulled out his sword — or more accurately, the dead man's body dropped back from the force of its own weight. As the corpse tumbled down the slope, the horses rearing in attempt to avoid it lost their balance and toppled.

The darkness of night along with the lack of solid foothold caused them all to fall into chaos. Arslan had already played his role as a mere decoy. Picking up his bow, he shot arrow after arrow. Clustered together as they were, Qaran's troops were unable to evade. Of the six arrows Arslan loosed, four hit their targets, and of those, two managed to wound the enemy. The remaining two were aimed at the knights clambering up the

slope with fierce momentum, but a spinning lance knocked them aside. “Prince!” bellowed a voice: it was Qaran. The prince sucked in a breath, tossed aside his bow, and confronted the treacherous Marzban.

“Qaran, there is something I wish to ask you!”

Arslan was all too aware that his voice betrayed his own nerves.

“As a Marzban, no, as a heretofore irreproachable warrior of Pars, why would you bend your knee to the Lusitanian invaders?”

There was no reply.

“I do not believe you were tempted by personal desire. If there is a reason for all this, do tell me, please.”

“Better for you to remain ignorant, oh accursed son of Andragoras!”

The naked derision in Qaran’s voice echoed yet with some deeper gloom. So too did the pair of eyes glaring at Arslan seem to glow with an unearthly light.

“Better to go to your death believing that I, Qaran, am nothing but a wretched traitor. Whether slain by a loyal retainer or at the hands of a traitor, death is death: either way, there is no difference.”

A terrible wind blew away the vines of doubt coiling about Arslan’s heart. Looking upon Qaran, it seemed as if his entire body had swelled. The power of a true warrior, their overwhelming difference in strength — Arslan could sense it all.

Arslan’s mount snorted nervously, as if reflecting the change in its rider’s heart.

Uttering a low battle cry, Qaran spurred his horse into a charge. An enormous, well-worn spear that had seen as much battle as its master lunged straight at the prince’s heart.

Arslan parried, half out of instinct. The spearhead veered away to empty space, but the prince's sword arm was numbed to the elbow.

"Tricky little —!"

Along with that roar swept forth a second blow.

If it couldn't quite be considered a miracle to have deflected the first blow, dodging the second blow was nothing short of miraculous. But any favoritism displayed by the heavens or by fate could only go so far. The third attack was fended off weakly, and should have pierced straight through Arslan's body. What brought things to an end once and for all was Dariun's voice.

"Qaran, your opponent is me and me alone!"

He was later than planned, for his path through the forest had been obstructed by mud left over from a fall of rain about two days before.

Qaran's face contorted in despair. He was clearly still affected by his memory of being brought to his knees before the brunt of Dariun's attack upon the fields of Atropatene. Qaran gave up on the precious prey before his very eyes. He turned his horse around, and the imminent demise that had been staring Arslan in the face beat a hasty retreat.

"Stay safe, Your Highness!"

With that single line, man and horse blurred into a single black shadow, and all around Arslan piled the corpses of enemy soldiers.

One knight, about to spear Dariun from behind, tumbled from the back of his horse with a scream. One of Farangis's arrows had pierced his face from the side.

Amid the confused ranks of the knights, two dark shadows danced.

Narses and Giv each confirmed with his own eyes the quality of his newly anointed comrade's swordsmanship.

The sound of clashing blades was chained together with sprays of blood.

A number of horses, finding their saddles suddenly emptied, escaped into the darkness. Half of them lost their footing upon the cliffs and toppled to their deaths screaming.

To Qaran's men, it was probably the worst night of their lives. Their enemies were not just valiant, but terrifyingly crafty. With the chaos and the darkness and the terrain on their side, they wreaked havoc among Qaran's troops, spreading death wherever they went, then fleeing once more from the eddy of men and horses only to vanish under the cloak of night. Two or three times this repeated. The order of Qaran's troops was dealt a fatal blow. They could no longer reform their ranks.

"Dariun, you go after Qaran!" shouted Narses as he twisted back to avoid the spray of blood from his latest victim. Nodding in reply, Dariun kicked the flanks of his black horse; pebbles and dirt scattered beneath its hooves as they chased after the fleeing Qaran.

A few of Qaran's men turned their horses around to attack him, but he speared one through and struck another aside without even bothering to duck the blood splattering into the night wind. As he closed in on Qaran, he tore into him.

"Some hero you are, facing only boys not even of age! Where is the valor for which you were so renowned before you slunk off to serve the Lusitanians? Is this shameful flight truly the way of the once-celebrated Qaran?"

The provocation produced results. Dignity wounded, Qaran boiled over with rage.

"Don't get cocky, you little upstart!"

With that furious cry, he swung his own spear to knock aside Dariun's. It was a violent blow. Both Dariun's body and his spear swayed in a rush of wind; even the black horse's steps wavered slightly. Just barely, they managed to keep from falling down the steep slope.

Without a moment's delay, Qaran's spear thrust straight at Dariun's face. Dariun reassumed a proper mount and blocked the vicious attack just in the nick of time.

Qaran's men had intended to interrupt and separate this astonishing pair, but whatever room for interference within this clash of man against man, horse against horse, and spear against spear had already vanished. Thrust. Sweep. Strike. Attack. Parry. Sparks scattered pale blue beneath the moonlight.

Qaran was a warrior of the highest caliber, one born to be Marzban. So long as his heart did not quail and his mind remained clear, he would not lose to Dariun in terms of valor.

Qaran's men, however, could not sustain the same fighting spirit as their master. They were cut down indiscriminately or shot down, or fled into the embrace of the night, ever the protector of the defeated. For one thing, it had not even occurred to them that their enemies actually numbered only in the single digits.

Arslan hurried his horse to the site of the duel and watched on, heart full of apprehension. Narses, with bloody sword still in hand, rode over to his side.

"It'll be fine. Your Highness, Dariun's victory is absolutely certain. Although under these circumstances, he may not have the luxury to capture him alive, that's all."

Narses's observation was correct. The very moment Qaran's spear and body appeared to move just the slightest bit slower than Dariun, the first sign of blood trickled down Qaran's left cheek.

Dariun's spearhead had nicked off a small chunk of his opponent's cheek. Although it was not a deep wound, the blood gushed into Qaran's eye, blinding him.

Dariun's spear thrust forward, lightning quick. Arslan gasped, but Dariun had not forgotten his own duty. He jabbed Qaran's side forcefully, not with

the tip of his spear but the end of its shaft; Qaran, losing his balance, was unhorsed and toppled to the ground.

Until now, all had unfolded according to Dariun's calculations and Narses's expectations. What betrayed their hopes was the steep incline of the ground, and Qaran's spear. Still clutched in Qaran's hands, the spear snapped against the rocky slope with a sharp crack, and not cleanly in two at that, but at a peculiar angle — slanting right through the neck of its wielder.

By the time Dariun leaped from his horse and lifted him into his arms, Qaran was already half gone. The spear looked like it had penetrated all the way through from either side of him, and yet both his eyes remained open and undimmed.

“Where is the king?”

Dariun spilled this deathly urgent question to the dying man's ear.

“Andragoras still lives...”

His voice was little more than a wheeze.

“But already the throne is no longer his. The rightful king...”

In place of his voice, flakes of dark red blood poured from his throat, and after a brief violent spasm, Marzban Qaran drew his last breath.

“The rightful king...?”

Dariun exchanged a glance with Narses, who had rushed over just in time to hear.

What they could not help but recall were the events surrounding King Andragoras's accession. Killing his own king and brother, claiming the throne for himself — a usurper, in other words. Was that not so? Such criticism had been quietly murmured ever since then. However, Andragoras, with the support of his powerful army, had prevailed over and

over again in conflicts with neighboring nations, and through that the country itself had benefited; the pragmatism of his rule, so to speak, had thus established the rightfulness of his authority.

Arslan, whose equestrian skill paled to theirs, arrived upon his horse just then, questioning the two of them with his eyes.

“Apparently King Andragoras still lives. As for anything beyond that, I’m afraid we were unable to ask.”

As Narses replied, Arslan stared at Dariun lowering Qaran’s body to the ground. The young knight in black remained silent. Although Narses had not conveyed to the prince the latter half of Qaran’s dying words, he too approved of this decision. To a boy of fourteen, such words would surely be too difficult to digest.

Dariun raised his voice at last.

“Your Highness, if he yet lives, you shall surely meet again someday. Besides, if the Lusitanian army has suffered the king to live until now, they must have their reasons; until that purpose is fulfilled, they are not likely to harm him needlessly.”

Arslan nodded, not so much because his heart truly understood, but because he did not wish for Dariun to worry.

At this time, Narses introduced the pair of young newcomers to the prince. First was the beautiful woman with waist-length hair, who bowed with utmost respect.

“Your Highness Arslan, I presume? Farangis is my name; though engaged in service at the temple of Mithra in Khuzestan, by the will of the late High Priestess I have come to join you as an ally.”

The young man offered his own name in turn.

“Giv is my name; in support of Your Highness, I escaped here from the capital Ecbatana.”

This was a complete and utter lie, but before he could be suspected, Giv mentioned a truth calculated to earn the prince's trust.

"Your Highness, your lady mother, the queen consort Tahmineh, was still in good health when I escaped. I was granted the great honor of hearing from the queen herself in person."

Future matters could be dealt with in the future. He'd always loved stirring up trouble anyway. For the time being, he could remain at Farangis's side and introduce Lusitanian soldiers to the pointy end of his sword for great justice. If he ever started feeling too constricted, then he could just run away. That was Giv's view of things.

Dariun, who had been hovering at a slight distance, murmured to his friend with a wry smile.

"So four becomes six. Well, that makes for a fifty percent increase in might, but I wonder if it's really fine to trust them?"

"With the Lusitanian army numbering 300,000, we shall each have 50,000 apiece to take care of. What great fun it shall be, don't you think?"

Narses was not just blithely making the comparison. He was pointing out, with his typical irony, just how difficult their circumstances would be from now on, with no hope of much improvement.

At any rate, in order to determine the whereabouts of the king and queen, it seemed they would have to somehow conduct an all-out infiltration of Ecbatana.



Chapter 5: Successor to the Throne

5. Successor to the Throne (i)

Clinging to the stone walls was a dampness so chilly that no droplets could form.

It was an underground chamber unblessed by the light of the sun. A lamp thicker than the full grip of two adult hands lit a radius of about ten gaz at the center of the room.

Upon a number of shelves were arranged texts and drugs and various other goods for the use of magic. Things such as mouse fetuses, poisonous herbs ground into powder, candles made of hardened sulfur, and severed hands soaked in alcohol.

On the stone floor stood the man of the silver mask. Though he was a guest, he did not seem particularly welcomed. The gray-robed elder who was the master of the room remained seated by himself upon an oak chair and began to speak as if this courtesy were quite justified. His voice was reminiscent of the screeching scrape of a rusted iron wheel.

“Do forgive me for remaining seated. You, in your ignorance, have no idea how much energy I was forced to waste on that trick. Calling forth fog upon plains that know neither valley nor mountain, just to confuse the Parsian cavalry into thinking no enemies were in the vicinity –“

“But left with plenty enough energy to babble, it seems,” Silver Mask remarked coldly. “Enough of that. For what purpose have you expressly summoned me here?”

“Oh, in that case.” The stale voice possessed a slight rhythmic quality. “Though you may not consider it pleasant news, Qaran is dead.”

For a moment, Silver Mask tensed. The light filtering from his eyes intensified. He did not question this news; perhaps he deemed it unnecessary to do so.

“If only he had kept quiet and remained loyal to King Andragoras, he could have lived on perfectly well as a Parsian general of highest honor, but because he chose to support you, he met with a pitiful end.”

Paying no heed to this feigned sympathy, the man of the silver mask stifled the emotion in his own voice.

“Qaran served me well. I have an obligation to his surviving family.”

Having stated this, he sucked in his breath.

“Who is it that killed Qaran? I must avenge him.”

“That much I know not. I told you, didn’t I? To fully recover my strength, I shall need an entire year.”

“Fine, no doubt it was the work of Andragoras’s brat and his party anyway. With this, that damned brat of Andragoras only draws the noose ever tighter.”

The man of the silver mask directed this warning to some unseen figure, and the scrawny elder unleashed a peculiar laugh.

“My, my, how unfortunate. Though I know not who is the most unfortunate.”

If the silver mask could display an expression, the current displeasure of its owner would be beyond obvious. Still, having apparently long grown used to the unpleasantness of dealing with the elder, he kept his cool.

“Beyond that, it is you who should take care. A challenger draws near.”

“A challenger?”

A dangerous light welled in the silver mask’s eyes and shot toward the elder’s wrinkled face.

“Andragoras’s brat?”

“No, not at all. However, it is someone close to him, perhaps even the very fellow who did in Qaran.”

The elder gazed with smoke-darkened eyes upon the silver mask standing wordlessly before him.

“It’s fine to plot revenge, but your opponent shan’t be alone.”

“It’s all the same no matter how many they number.”

“A one on one duel is fine, but avoid one against two. Even with your swordsmanship, you are no match for two opponents at once.”

To this Silver Mask said nothing.

“You are not the only strong one in this world. The sun of Pars does not shine for you alone. For you see, self-confidence and overconfidence are as inseparable as night and darkness.”

The man of the silver mask nodded, but it seemed to be partly a formality, and partly out of reflex. Soon enough, the silver mask took his leave, and the elder opened the small leather purse the man had left on the table and counted the dinars within. Perhaps they were of no particular concern, for he dumped the dinars unceremoniously in a drawer of his desk, grumbling and muttering to himself.

“Best to just think of that fellow as coin. In order to revive Serpent King Zahhak, all the vast lands of Pars must be covered in fresh blood. All shall be prey to Lord Zahhak; I care not one whit whom shall be king of Pars...”

The elder raised a hand and pulled on a cord dangling from the ceiling. A picture drawn upon aged sheepskin unfurled against the wall.

Displayed before the elder was the portrait of a crowned man with a dark face and red eyes. Assuming an entirely different persona from when he had faced the man of the silver mask, the elder bowed with utmost respect.

“My lord and master Zahhak, please wait just a little longer. Night and day your servant here strives for his master’s second advent...”

Surely there were none in this land who did not know the name of Serpent King Zahhak. Save for newborn babes, that is. That was the name of an ancient ruler of the world, a most cruel and demonic king. By him had Sage King Jamshid been sawed alive, the pieces of his body tossed into the sea, all his wealth and power stolen.

From Zahhak’s two shoulders sprouted a pair of black snakes. This was the origin of his “Serpent King” epithet. These two snakes feasted on human brains; during Zahhak’s reign, two subjects were killed each day, whether noble *wuzurgan* or lowly *ghulam*, and their brains were fed to the serpents. This reign of terror lasted for a thousand years unbroken; the world fell into ruin; people were born into the world fettered by fear, and went to their deaths encircled by collars of despair. Forty such generations passed before the rule of the Serpent King came to an end. Thus began the royal dynasty of Pars —

With a worshipful gaze, the elder watched for some time over the two black snakes pictured crooking their heads from Zahhak’s shoulders. Then, with great labor, his emaciated body stirred, floundering in the cold air like a bizarre deep-sea fish. Before long, his lips cracked open like a fissured boulder.

“Gurgin.”

The elder called urgently for someone.

“Gurgin!”

“Yes, Master, here do I await.”

The replying voice flowed forth from a dark corner of the room, but the figure of the respondent could not be seen. However, the elder did not seem to care either, and ordered rather impatiently, “Summon thy other six men at once! Since Atropatene, the deaths of soldiers and civilians have together totaled one million, but it is not enough. The Parsian populace

numbers twenty million; if the blood of at least half that is not drunk by the earth, the second advent of our lord and master Zahhak shall lie beyond our power.”

“Immediately?”

“As quickly as possible.”

“... Certainly. Master’s wish is my command.”

The voice faded swiftly, evaporating like particles into the air. For a while the elder stood there without a word, but his eyes and mouth betrayed a sinister delight.

“A curse upon all who obstruct the glory of Serpent King Zahhak...”



5. Successor to the Throne (ii)

The capital of Ecbatana, like its resumed bazaar, began to recover some semblance of order under the Lusitanian occupation, and yet blood continued to flow unstemmed.

The city was a bedlam of rioting *ghulam*; the slaves who had cooperated with the Lusitanian invaders naturally expected their just rewards, but everything remained completely within the grasp of the Lusitanians.

“These spoils are to be presented entirely to His Majesty, the honored King Innocentius VII of Lusitania. How could we possibly leave them to filth such as you?”

For some time the slaves had, in gleeful vengeance, been living it up in the mansions of the *wuzurgan* and the wealthy; the Lusitanians now put this to an end, chasing those wretched souls back to the pens where they had previously been confined and chaining them back up. Protests were countered with lashes and curses.

“Fools. What reason have disciples of glorious Ialdabaoth such as we to share the fruits of success with lowly heathens, much less slaves like you? Such conceit!”

That wasn’t the deal — had it not been said that when the city fell under Lusitanian occupation, the slaves would be emancipated?

“There is no need to keep promises made with heathens. Would you lot strike deals with the likes of pigs and cows?”

Thus was the future of the *ghulam* snatched away much as their pasts had been.

For those blessed with prosperity it was perhaps unavoidable: this storm that had come sweeping over Pars from northwestern Lusitania, utterly fair and impartial. Those with much to lose, lost much. The aristocracy, the priests, the lords, rich merchants — all the luxury they had accumulated for

themselves through ruthless lawful authority were seized now through equally ruthless violence. For them, the night had only just begun.

“Kill! Kill! Kill the wicked infidels!”

Calling for blood as if he were parched sand was the archbishop Jean Bodin. His intoxication grew deeper by the day.

“The glory of God grows more brilliant with every drop of heathen blood. Show no mercy! For each infidel who lives on to eat his share represents a lost share for a true believer of Ialdabaoth.”

But of course not all of the 300,000 Lusitanian soldiers shared the same passion for “heathen extermination” as Archbishop Bodin. The military command and other bureaucrats who took part in governance all knew their own goal was to shift from conquest and destruction to administration and reconstruction. The royal prince Guiscard had exhorted thus. The average soldier too was by now sick of blood and the stench of death, and some had even begun accepting bribes to plead for Parsian lives.

“This person along with his family all wish to convert. I wonder if it might not be good to spare them, so that they may enter the service of God.”

“A false conversion!” Bodin would leap up and shout. “Those who request conversion without undergoing interrogation cannot be trusted!”

That was what Bodin was like, and so his view of the Parsian queen Tahmineh was just as intolerant.

“That is the consort of the Parsian king Andragoras; of course she cannot receive the grace of Ialdabaoth, accursed infidel that she is. Why do you not throw her to the fires already?”

Because he pressed the king thus, Innocentius VII exhausted all his efforts dodging polemic and was unable to bring up the matter of his marriage to Tahmineh.

“Perhaps even God Himself may find offense in this, but before that, Archbishop Bodin had better be persuaded, brother mine.”

What the royal prince Guiscard said was reasonable, but faced with his brother’s beseeching gaze, he feigned ignorance, having no intent of persuading Bodin himself. Guiscard had long felt bitter about his brother’s weakness and the way he immediately depended on him to take care of any difficulties he encountered. This marriage was his and his alone. Was this then not his obstacle alone to overcome?

Of course, for Guiscard to think this way was not for his brother’s sake. It was in anticipation of the arrival, before long, of the day his brother’s hatred for Bodin surpassed his devotion.

One of the vast courtyards of the palace was blanketed in decorative tiles, with lion fountains and orange trees and gazebos of white granite arranged all around. This place had been only recently stained with the blood of Parsian nobles and court slaves alike, but at the moment all traces of blood had been wiped away, and even if the splendor of old could not be recovered, it was no longer unsightly.

This was the result of strict orders from King Innocentius VII of Lusitania — apparently unbeknownst to Archbishop Bodin. This was because, in one of the blocks facing this courtyard, a single lady had been placed under house arrest. Although she was officially under confinement, even the most notable noblewomen of Lusitania could scarcely hope for the luxury afforded to this heathen lady; she was, after all, Queen Tahmineh of Pars.

Innocentius VII called upon this block facing the courtyard every day without fail, all in order to seek out Tahmineh. Not a peep could be gotten from Tahmineh, who kept her face covered with a black veil; meanwhile, this supposed conqueror of a Lusitanian king would ask only whether she was suffering any inconvenience and other such silly nonsense before hastily slinking away as if dreading Bodin’s scrutiny. However, when the twelfth month arrived, Innocentius VII arrived one day with his chest puffed out in the air of a man hoping to be praised.

“Upon the new year We shall no longer be King, but Emperor.”

He would no longer be the sovereign of the former kingdoms of Lusitania, Maryam, and Pars, but Emperor Innocentius of the newly formed Lustianian Empire. No longer would he be simply “the Seventh” of a single nation.

“And accordingly, Lady Tahmineh, dost thou not agree that, as the public believes, an emperor requires an empress? We, too, believe this proper.”

She did not reply.

Whatever meaning Tahmineh’s silence held, the king of Lusitania was unable to decipher. Refusal? Acceptance? Or was she waiting for something? Innocentius VII did not understand. He had until now been a simple man living in a simple world. Good and evil had been as clear to him as summer day and winter night. That there were some things utterly beyond his comprehension, so to speak, now dawned vaguely at last upon the no longer young king.

5. Successor to the Throne (iii)

That day, in the open space before the south gate of the capital, a grand book burning ceremony was held. A total of twelve million volumes had been designated to burn as “wicked heathen books”; the royal libraries had been entirely emptied. Standing before the texts piled mountain high and the crowd of spectators was the shouting Archbishop Bodin. One particular knight with scholarly interests bravely — or perhaps rashly — raised a protest against the book burning.

“Even if you say they’re heathen books, is it really a good idea to toss such precious texts into the fire without even examining them? Even if they are to be set aflame, shouldn’t it be after enough time has been spent determining their value?”

“Blasphemer!”

Bodin stamped his feet upon the ground.

“If what is recorded in these texts is in accordance with the holy scriptures of Ialdabaoth, then the scriptures alone are sufficient for earthly mortals. Should they contradict the scriptures, then they are based on the trickery of evil demons and must be destroyed. No matter what, all should be thrown to the fire!”

“But to toss even medical texts into the fire....”

Receiving a severe strike to his mouth, the knight staggered back.

“One who reveres Ialdabaoth from the bottom of his heart shall not be possessed by the demons of disease. One who is diseased, carrying the seeds of evil within his heart, shall receive divine retribution! Even if he is king of a nation...”

Directing a look full of poison at the king sitting upon his distant throne, Bodin raised his voice anew.

“Even if he is king of a nation, when he gives rise to such wicked designs as taking a heathen woman to wife, one so haughty shall surely be struck down by a divine staff formed from his own sickness. Repent and reform, oh sinful ones!”

Innocentius VII paled, and his flabby body quivered. Not out of fear, but out of extreme displeasure. The royal prince Duke Guiscard, stationed beside him, was secretly satisfied. To him, this was an excellent sign.

Bodin raised his hand, and the mountain of texts was doused with oil before a torch was tossed in.

The flames blazed high at once, swallowing twelve million volumes of texts in the conflagration. The recorded thoughts and feelings of humanity accumulated for over a millennium from before the nation’s founding were now all erased in the name of the invaders’ god.

History, poetry, geography, medicine, pharmacology, philosophy, agriculture, artisanship... the effort and passion of countless people that

must be poured into the completion of a single volume were all cremated in the flames and transformed to ash.

Blocked by ranks of armored Lusitanian soldiers, the Parsians witnessing this fiery scene muffled their cries of outrage and grief.

Standing side by side within the crowd was a pair of tall men whose hoods were pulled low over their eyes. The slightly shorter man muttered in bitter fury.

“So it’s not enough to steal all our property; now they mean to incinerate our very culture. This can no longer be described as mere barbarism. This is the work of apes.”

“Look at the one in charge, that so-called archbishop dancing around in glee.”

“I am going to kill that man Bodin or whatever he’s called. I’ll leave the king and his brother to you. Got it, Dariun? That bastard is mine.”

“Very well!”

It was Dariun and Narses.

Without bothering to see the book burning to the end, the two of them left the space before the gates and strolled toward the somewhat mazelike downtown area. Disregarding their anger over the book burning, they had a need to gather news on King Andragoras and Queen Tahmineh.

“Originally, it seems the word *ialdabaoth* meant ‘sacred ignorance’ in ancient Lusitanian.”

Narses explained this with no evident amusement as they walked along.

According to their mythology, humanity once belonged to a paradise of eternal spring, where they dwelled in bliss, free of suffering and doubt, but

were cast out of paradise for taking a bite from the forbidden fruit of wisdom. In Narses's view, this was a rather unpleasant myth. He felt it was a way of thinking that reduced humans to pigs. People who failed to question inconsistencies, who failed to rage at injustice, were not even equal to pigs. And yet why was it that, not just the Ialdabaothan faith, but religions in general always seemed to preach against doubt and anger?

“Did you know, Dariun? You could say that these people’s destruction of Maryam, and even their invasion of Pars, was actually encouraged by what is written in their scriptures.”

“You mean their god bestowed Pars upon them?”

“Pars was not specified, exactly. However, according to their scriptures, their god promised to grant his followers the most beautiful and bountiful lands in the world. From their perspective, then, a land of such beauty and wealth such as Pars is naturally theirs to claim, while we are little more than unlawful squatters, so to speak.”

“How very convenient.”

Dariun, adjusting his hood, brushed aside the hair that had fallen into his eyes.

“So, the Lusitanians believe wholeheartedly in this so-called mandate of their god?”

“Well, is it faith? Or is it just using faith to justify their own invasion?”

If it were the latter, the Lusitanians could perhaps be negotiated with diplomatically from the same standpoint. Were it the former, the Parsians would not survive without using brute force. No matter what, they had to consider different methods to defeat the Lusitanians.

“There are several ways to take the Parsians in hand.”

For the sake of the prince who had promised him the position of court artist, Narses was resolutely plotting out various possibilities with all his might.

“For example, if we emancipated all the *ghulam* of the land under the prince’s name and promised to abolish the institute of slavery altogether, and just one tenth of them took up arms, that would form an army of 500,000. This is operating under the premise that they shall be self-sufficient, though.”

That made sense. Dariun said as much and nodded.

“But in that case, we shan’t be able to expect the support of the territorial lords and aristocrats who currently own slaves. There is no one so gullible as to agree to an alliance despite knowing they shall lose out in the exchange.”

“When you were lord of Dailam, did you not free your slaves and even give up your territories?”

“I’m an eccentric, after all.”

Narses’s remark sounded suspiciously like a boast, but all of a sudden, he made a bitter expression.

“... Besides, even if the slaves are emancipated, it’s not like everything would be settled then. It’s what comes after that’s difficult; we cannot expect everything to go as we’ve dreamed up before our desks.”

Narses seemed to be speaking from personal experience. Dariun did not question him further. Narses gave his head a single shake, as if to recollect his composure, and began to count off on his fingers a number of strategies for defeating the Lusitanian forces.

“One method is to use the territories of former Badakhshan as bait for hooking Sindhura. Another method is to infiltrate Maryam and incite the royalist faction to revolt with the intent of restoring the throne, thus cutting their nation’s communications with the Lusitanian army. Or perhaps we

might as well work in Lusitania itself and stir up ambitions for the throne among the remaining royals and nobles. Or we can agitate for the conquest of Lusitania among the neighboring nations...”

Dariun stared at his friend in admiration.

“How do you manage to throw out clever moves and schemes one after another like that? Compared to an unsophisticated military man like me, you really are something else.”

“Flattered as I am to earn the praise of the finest warrior of Pars, of the hundred plans one might concoct, only ten can actually be put into effect, and only one shall be successful, and that’s about it. If all the things one considers could come true, there would be no such thing as ruined nations and perished rulers.”

The two of them were about to enter a tavern. Even in times of chaos there were some businesses that did not halt operations — brothels for instance, or gambling dens, or fences dealing in victory spoils and pillaged loot. And along with them, establishments offering drink with conversation.

Naturally, such places were filled with irresponsible rumors, and in fact the number of reports flying around probably exceeded the number of gathered people.

From the tavern tottered out a single Parsian soldier. He was no doubt affiliated with Qaran’s faction, one of those who had sworn loyalty to Lusitania. The soldier, about six parts drunk, collided into Dariun’s shoulder in attempt to sidestep him, and glanced at the face beneath the hood while cursing under his breath. His expression transformed at once.

“... Ahh! Dariun!”

With a magnificent yelp, the soldier fled, shoving the people in his way and thrusting them aside as he made his escape. Whatever alcohol content in his body had probably hurtled out to the other end of the skies; there was not even the time to reach out and seize him by the collar.

Narses, stroking his chin, said admiringly, “Running away without a fight, eh? You certainly understand your own limits well.”

After that, the two of them followed after the fleeing soldier. But they did not break into a run. Instead of chasing him down, they had already made deliberations beforehand.

The two of them, purposely keeping their distance from each other, wandered deeper and deeper into the labyrinthine streets. The faint whisper of conversation trickled down from the walls of the buildings, and every last eye was fixed in surreptitious surveillance upon their figures.

Narses had not even counted to a thousand when his way was blocked by four soldiers who had expectantly tagged his head with an invisible bounty.

Dariun had already achieved the titles of Mardan and Shergir in his teens, and had also been the youngest of the Marzbans. For this was he called *“marde-e mardan,”* a man among men. In comparison, Narses would quite understandably be seen as the easier target. However, in the end this choice brought upon them no fortune whatsoever. Four white blades unsheathed, but this was the extent of their initiative.

In a single breath Narses leaped at the rightmost enemy and chopped down with his sword from the side. The enemy had no time to even parry, and his own sword was sent flying by Narses’s blow. The moment after their blades clashed, Narses’s sword traced short white claws through the sky, slicing cruelly across his opponent’s neck.

Adroitly evading the spray of blood shadowing his field of vision, Narses stooped lightly on one knee and swiftly flicked up the point of his blade. The right arm of the enemy who had appeared before his eyes flew into the sky, trailing blood, sword still in hand. Half a cry later, a third soldier fell to the ground, his chest run through by the flash of a sword as Dariun rushed back into view.

A fourth soldier remained standing, unable to make a peep; looking over one shoulder, he witnessed Dariun’s approaching figure, and turning back around, he saw Narses’s mocking grin, and so he dropped his sword and

slumped to the ground. As his mouth flapped open and shut in vain, he tossed out a pouch of cowhide.

The pouch opened, spilling ten dinars and several times more drachms to the ground, but neither Dariun nor Narses paid them any heed whatsoever.

“We want one thing only: the whereabouts of King Andragoras.”

“I don’t know,” cried the soldier at first, in a voice close to despair. “If I knew, I’d tell you. I do value my life, but I really don’t know.”

“Even mere rumors will do. Think hard for your own sake,” Narses coolly pressed on.

Knowing his life depended on it, the soldier spilled out everything he knew. It seemed King Andragoras was truly still alive. He’d probably been imprisoned somewhere, but Lord Qaran had only confided in a handful of his closest men. Even the Lusitanian generals hadn’t been informed, and they seemed to be disgruntled over that. That’s right, there was one more thing, a rumor that couldn’t be ignored...

“Supposedly Queen Tahmineh is to be wed to the Lusitanian king — or so I’ve heard the Lusitanian soldiers gossiping. They say their king lost his soul the moment he first laid eyes on Her Majesty.”

“What did you say — !?”

Both the audacious Narses and the intrepid Dariun gaped mutely, unable to dredge up any further remarks.

After tying up the soldier and tossing him into a trash bin, the two of them began to walk back toward the streets. The situation with Queen Tahmineh left them despondent. When a person died, that was it, but living on, just how much trouble and suffering did one have to face?

“Badakhshan, Pars, and now Lusitania. To seduce the rulers of three nations in a row, beauty like Her Majesty’s ought to be considered a crime.”

“Whatever the case may be, if the queen is to be married off, we must concern ourselves over King Andragoras. No matter which nation, not a single one recognizes bigamy. Even if he still lives, he may well fall under harm simply for being an impediment to this marriage.”

“Or perhaps the Lusitanian king is forcing Queen Tahmineh into this marriage by dangling King Andragoras’s life in exchange for her hand.”

They both discussed matters for some time, but were unable to reach a clear conclusion. Whatever the result, they decided once more to go ahead with the same strategy as before. They would worry about the results when they happened. They wanted more evidence to corroborate the soldier’s earlier confession; and as for Narses, he felt it would be a pain to come up with a new plan at this point.

Agreeing to meet up at the previously designated tavern if they came up empty-handed, the two parted ways.

Was it coincidence? Or was it an impartial appointment of fate? None could say. After Dariun had turned a number of corners, danger came howling at his door.

Before Dariun’s very eyes appeared a sinister silver mask.

5. Successor to the Throne (iv)

If Dariun possessed the same power as Farangis to understand non-human speech, perhaps he would have sensed his Uncle Vahriz’s voice warning him from the other realm.

However, even lacking such power, he could easily sniff out the danger emanating from this opponent he was encountering for the first time. Naked hostility and malice blasted toward Dariun with the heat of the desert wind.

That Dariun drew his sword in response to this killing aura was perhaps what they referred to as warrior instinct.

“You certainly went to a lot of trouble with those petty tricks of yours, dunce!”

Both the low laughter from behind the mask as well as its physical appearance had an equally ominous vibe. No need to exchange useless dialogue now. There was a mutual understanding: they were enemies.

The clash of blades crescendoed. Dariun, darting around, continued his offensive after the first strike, but could not so much as graze his opponent.

Dariun was unnerved. Even he whose valor was acknowledged by all could not remain unconscious of or unalarmed by his opponent’s immense strength. He switched tactics. Halting his offensive, he retreated half a step and turned to defense.

The man of the silver mask nimbly stepped forward, showering him in severe attacks, but much like Dariun a moment ago, he was met with an impenetrable guard.

As they cut left and right, traces of gleaming blades flashed through the air; each party had come to realize the existence of a foe of never before seen gallantry.

Pale blade engaged pale blade, locking forcefully midair. The two men’s faces loomed close; each could hear the other’s breathing overlapping with his own.

“Let’s hear your name!” said the man of the silver mask. Underneath his chilled voice seeped the slightest hint of awe.

Glaring back at the light gleaming from the eye slits of the mask, Dariun brusquely reported his name.

“Dariun!”

“Dariun, you say...?”

The questioning tone as he sifted through his memories transformed an instant later into a voice filled with malicious derision. Dariun could not help but be startled at this unexpected reaction.

“This is rich. That nephew of Vahriz? No wonder...”

... you 're so strong, or something or other, but the silver mask swallowed his words and shot forth a baleful glare, his mask quaking with peals of laughter that would have surely raised the hairs of anyone other than Dariun. When his laughter settled, an arrogant confession came flying from his lips.

“Tell you what — it is I who cut off the scraggly white head of your uncle Vahriz!”

“What!?”

“For a lapdog of Andragoras, such retribution is only fitting. Would you like to die as your uncle did?”

The moment their crossed blades sprang apart, Dariun’s sword swept singing through the air. Such ferocious speed exceeded the expectations of the man of the silver mask. The man’s blade, moving into the defensive, swung uselessly into the air as Dariun’s blow struck his face.

Crack! went the silver mask as it split in half. The face that had been protected so uncompromisingly was exposed to the air. Violent gasps heaved from the man’s mouth.

And so Dariun saw it — two faces. Beneath the cloven mask was the countenance of a young man approximately the same age as Dariun. The pale, elegant visage on the left, and the dark, grotesque patch of inflamed burns on the right: both coexisted upon a single contour.

Though it was only a fleeting glimpse, this face etched itself deeply into Dariun’s vision. The man raised his left arm to conceal his face, but his eyes, welling with a bloody light, glowered at Dariun. His blade flashed in counterattack.

Dariun leaped back, but the keenness of the sword, fueled by rage and hatred, could not be compared to before. It danced like a striking snake, its white blade stretching out in pursuit of Dariun. Sure enough, Dariun staggered, thrown off balance.

As he was about to land the critical strike, the man who had lost his silver mask abruptly shifted direction, just barely deflecting the blade slicing toward him from the side. Before the man's fearsome view stood Narses.

"Hey now, won't you ask for my name? Otherwise, shan't it be embarrassing to introduce myself?"

The gleam of murderous intent shot forth like arrows from the face shadowed by arm and cloak, but Narses did not notice — at least not on the surface.

"Who are you, buffoon?"

"I don't much care for your manner, but as you've asked, I suppose I must commence introductions. Narses is my name; I am to be employed as the official court artist under the reign of the next king of Pars."

"Court artist, you say!?"

"You wouldn't know, lacking any connection to art, but those with the sense for it all call me the second coming of the great master Mani."

"Says who!" a recovered Dariun muttered emphatically as he straightened himself. Seeing that his breathing and his pulse were both completely back under control, the man of the silver mask knew he must let go of this already lost chance for victory. One against two, and with his arm engaged in hiding his face besides, even as he fended off such gallant foes. As well, he had perhaps recalled the forecast of the gray-robed elder in that underground chamber.

"Let's settle this some other time. Consider today a draw."

“So you’re a fellow who spouts the conventional lines for every occasion. No need to delay until tomorrow something that can be done today!”

Having lost his silver mask, the man did not rise to Narses’s challenge. Still covering his face with one arm, he deftly retreated from the dangerous pincer.

“This is farewell, you travesty of an artist. Improve your skills for the next time we meet!”

This was a baseless taunt, but it was more than enough to wound Narses’s ego. Without a word, the future court artist advanced, hurling back a strike that sliced through the wind.

The man who had lost his silver mask twisted smoothly around even as he parried the blow. It was a move even more elegant than it was skillful; whether Narses or Dariun, neither could find an opening to exploit.

The man of the silver mask dove into a narrow alley, kicking down the tubs and barrels along the walls to seal his trail. When the hem of his cloak vanished around the first corner, the pair of knights in service to Arslan relinquished all thoughts of pursuit. Dariun clapped his friend’s shoulder.

“I’ve no idea who that bastard is, but he’s got tremendous skill. If it weren’t for your help, he’d probably have smashed my head to pieces by now.”

“Sure, whatever you say, but that fellow truly is difficult to stomach. What nerve, calling me a *travesty* to art. The world is rife with pompous fools who lack any understanding of arts and culture. Surely this must be the end of days.” When Dariun did not reply, he continued, “By the way, that man seemed to be well acquainted with your lord uncle. An old friend, perhaps?”

“I’ve been considering that as well, but can’t recall anything. Though I did wonder if that mask was just for show, that doesn’t seem to be the case. With those terrible burns, he probably has no choice but to cover up.”

Despite nodding along to Dariun's voice, Narses wore an expression indicating that he was not entirely satisfied.

Whatever the case, he felt there had to be something more to it. One reason to wear a mask was so that others would be unable to recognize his original appearance, but when among complete strangers in a completely unfamiliar land, such an excuse ought no longer hold. If it weren't for those burn scars, perhaps even Narses himself would have unexpectedly recollected something with ease...

5. Successor to the Throne (v)

Gathered in a farmer's residence at a certain village laid to waste by Lusitanian soldiers were the modest but stalwart anti-Lusitanian forces. Arslan, Dariun, Narses, Farangis, Giv, and Elam. Each and every one was very young — like Elam, who was no more than thirteen. However, for they who had chosen to resist the powerful Lusitanian army like the lowly mantis before the chariot, surely no promising or fruitful future awaited.

Arslan received a great blow upon being told that his mother the queen was being pressed to marry the Lusitanian king.

Both Narses as well as Dariun had intended to hide this news, but either way, once the wedding ceremony was held, the reports would reach Arslan's ears whether he liked it or not. It was not something that could be kept secret.

For some time the knights watched wordlessly over the equally taciturn prince pacing back and forth in the room.

Before long, Arslan came to a halt and muttered through gritted teeth, "My lady mother must be rescued without a moment's delay."

That beautiful and yet somewhat aloof mother of his — both the first time he rode a horse, and the first time he set off on a hunt, he had received praise from her, but something about her words had been lacking in warmth.

According to the court ladies he had overheard gossiping behind her back, “It’s because Her Majesty values only herself...” It was possible, perhaps, that their criticism was justified. However, Tahmineh was nonetheless the woman who had given birth to him; as a child he could not fail to rescue his own mother.

“My lady mother must be rescued. Before she is coerced to wed the Lusitanian king...” Arslan repeated.

Dariun and Narses exchanged a furtive glance. The prince’s feelings were only natural, but with their currently inferior might, prioritizing the queen’s rescue would significantly restrict their tactical options.

“I bet Her Lying Majesty seduced the Lusitanian king in order to preserve her own well-being. She’s the kind of woman who’d pull something like that...”

Such insolent fancies had occurred to Giv, but as expected, they did not leave his mouth. Though he now counted among Arslan’s party, he was the least necessary of the four, so he was currently just enjoying himself on his own terms. He’d heard that Narses was to become court artist; well then in that case maybe they’d let him become court musician himself. Such things were running through his mind.

Green-eyed Farangis gazed sympathetically at the prince.

“Your Highness, be not hasty. The Lusitanian king may wish to wed your lady mother, but in the eyes of the Lusitanian people, your lady mother is a heathen. Those around him are not likely to grant their approval so readily. It is my belief that the state of affairs shall not grow concerning anytime soon.”

Narses nodded.

“It’s as Farangis says. If he forces the marriage, he will invite the revolt of the clergymen in particular, and if any ambitious royals or noblemen stress the issue, it shall probably provoke infighting. He cannot afford to force the matter.”

Following that, Dariun spoke as well.

“Unpleasant though this may be for Your Highness, if the situation is as such, there should be little chance for Her Majesty to come to harm. As for His Majesty the king, it seems he is at least still alive, so an opportunity to go to his aid shall surely arise.”

Each of them knew that their presented arguments were sound, but whether or not they were comprehensible to a youth of fourteen was a different issue entirely. More so than acknowledging the difficulty of the situation, they hoped Arslan would display the forbearance of a ruler and place his responsibilities as such above personal obligation.

In the end, Arslan’s shoulders slumped.

“At any rate, our numbers are much too few. By what means shall we best gain allies, Narses?”

After a while, Narses replied, “To impose absolute justice upon the earth is probably impossible. However, there should exist some form of governance preferable to that of Parsian rule until now as well as to Lusitanian tyranny. Even if we cannot be rid entirely of that which is unreasonable, we should at least be able to diminish such things. To gain allies, Your Highness should make your future intentions known to the Parsian populace. For royal legitimacy has naught to do with the blood one possesses, but is guaranteed solely through upright governance.”

This was the essence of his views, but what Arslan was hoping for was a more explicit strategy. Narses, knowing this, continued.

“Forgive my rudeness in saying so, but as a ruler, one needs boast neither strategic mind nor military prowess. Those are the roles played by his retainers.”

Staring straight at the red-faced Arslan, Narses swallowed a mouthful of wine from his cup.

“First, Your Highness, please disclose your objectives. That way, we shall be able to concentrate all our efforts on helping you fulfill them.”

Arslan was quiet.

“When the conquest reaches an end, the Lusitanians shall no doubt embark upon the total eradication of Parsian culture. They shall prohibit the use of Parsian speech, style Parsian names after the manner of Lusitania, destroy the temples of all the gods of Pars, and erect temples to Ialdabaoth everywhere they turn.”

“Will there be no alternative?”

“That is why they are called barbarians. They are unable to comprehend that other people also have things they value, so to speak. When it comes to the destruction of temples, at least...” Narses replaced his wine cup on the table. “According to the teachings of Ialdabaoth, there exist three ways of dealing with nonbelievers. Those who convert voluntarily are allowed to preserve more or less all their wealth and become free citizens. Those forced to convert find their wealth confiscated and are enslaved. Those who stubbornly refuse to convert...”

Giv drew a finger emphatically across his throat. Narses, nodding in response to the movement, gazed at the contemplative Arslan. The prince’s cheeks were flushed.

“I cannot allow the people of Pars to meet with such an end. To that effect, how should I act? Inexperienced though I may be, please lend me your strength.”

All five of them, Elam included, fixed their eyes upon the prince. At last, Dariun represented them all in reply.

“Modest though our strength may be, gladly shall we aid Your Highness in opposing the Lusitanians and restoring peace to Pars.”

“You have my thanks. I leave myself in your hands.”

Arslan did not yet possess much else beyond this vague conviction. Of the long journey of self-discovery, so to speak, that he must now set out upon, he had yet to receive any insight. At fourteen he was still immature: whether to the great *mardan* warriors surrounding him, or to his innumerable enemies, he was a powerless existence. Among the many responsibilities he now bore, foremost among them was no doubt his own growth.

5. Successor to the Throne (vi)

Underground beneath the jail was another prison, this one with thick walls and heavy doors, and isolated from the cells on the ground floor by long flights of stairs. Furthermore, armored soldiers stood guard everywhere, no doubt to intercept intruders long before they could reach their targets.

The only prisoner in this dungeon was a middle-aged man of powerful build whose hair and beard alike had grown utterly unkempt, and yet who cut a far more majestic figure than the men interrogating him.

It was King Andragoras of Pars, who had vanished without a trace in the world above.

In spite of the countless wounds oozing blood from him, Andragoras still lived. Or perhaps it was more accurate to say that he had been allowed to live. Whenever his interrogators' examination reached a stopping point, a scrawny little physician who looked to be not more than half their size would materialize and conduct treatment upon the prisoner. Both lash marks and poker burns were washed in alcohol and smeared with salve; then herbal compresses were applied, his mouth was forced open and medicinal brandy poured down his throat, and then he was made to sleep. When the man's robust frame looked like it had recovered enough strength to resist, the interrogators would begin their work anew.

For several days and several nights this continued. Once, the man tore off his chains with a burst of sheer physical strength; for that, they switched from then on to chains originally meant to bind a *sher*.

Sometime during these cruel, monotonous days, a change arose at last. To the depths of the underground prison arrived a guest. Molded diligently from hate and malice, blazing with flames of vengeance — such was the ambiance of the brand new silver mask worn by this visitor.

The interrogators greeted the man of the silver mask with utmost respect. Daily life at the prison, even for those conducting the interrogations, required much fortitude. Change, no matter what shape it took, must be welcomed.

“... So? How is his condition?”

Weakened, but in no immediate danger to his life, indicated the representative.

“Good. Don’t kill him.”

There was a melodic inflection to the voice of the silver mask.

“I repeat my order. You must not kill him. This bastard is not to be killed until he has been shown the severed head of his own son before his very eyes.”

On receiving a dull glance from King Andragoras, the man of the silver mask let out a low laugh.

“Oh Andragoras! It’s just as you’ve heard. Your son and heir still lives. However, that shall not be for long. He lives only so that I might find him and kill him with my own hands.”

The man of the silver mask drew close to the prisoner’s face.

“Do you know who I am?”

There was no response.

“You still don’t know? Then let me tell you. It is a name that should not be unfamiliar to your ears. My name is Hirmiz. My father was Osroes.”

“Hirmiz...?”

“That’s right. Hirmiz. Legitimate son of Osroes, the previous king. Your nephew. And the true king of Pars!”

Though Andragoras said nothing, the iron cuffs about his wrists seemed to make a slight creak. The man of the silver mask heaved a heavy sigh.

“Surprised? Or perhaps you haven’t the energy to be surprised? How unfortunate that you did not succeed in killing me back when you were unable to accede to the throne. The very instant the evil god protecting you looked away, I managed to escape from that blaze.”

As he spoke, the man unfastened his silver mask. With the mask removed, the man’s face was exposed before Andragoras’s eyes.

“This is the face you burned. Look well upon it! Avert not your eyes. Look upon this proof of the great sin you committed sixteen years ago.”

The countenance that appeared from beneath the silver mask was the same as Dariun had witnessed. The half that preserved its original elegance and the half that had been sacrificed to the god of fire together pieced into a single face. The dull gaze of Andragoras beneath his disheveled hair seemed to direct itself over, but soon enough his chin dropped again as if from fatigue.

“... It is I who am the rightful king of Pars.”

Putting his silver mask back on, Hirmiz calmly reasserted his own claim.

“How I have suffered and struggled these sixteen years in order to reclaim my rightful place. You have absolutely no idea, do you? No need to retrieve your memories of the past; before that, better for you to consider only the future that awaits for your wife and son, as well as for yourself.”

His voice broke off, replaced by the sound of footsteps. Within the prisoner’s field of vision, silver-masked Hirmiz strode toward the

deferential interrogators bowing deeply in a row. The first confrontation between uncle and nephew after sixteen long years was over.

As he watched Hirmiz leave, King Andragoras's eyes blazed to life. The thinnest pinprick of light expanded to fill his pupils, and when it dissipated, a smile as cold as icy poisoned wine painted itself upon Andragoras's face.

The king burst into laughter. Chased from his throne, his kingdom stolen, and now even denied his right to rule, the man rattled the chains that bound him as he laughed and laughed.

For reasons unknown to anyone but himself, Andragoras's laughter continued to echo along the walls of his underground cell.

— Year 320 of the Parsian calendar. With King Andragoras's whereabouts unknown, the royal capital Ecbatana fell. The Kingdom of Pars came to ruin.



Afterword

There is a book that was written during 12th century England, called *Historia Regum Britanniae* (*History of the Kings of Britain*). The writer was supposedly a teacher from Oxford, but prior to [Sir Thomas Malory](#)'s *Le Morte d'Arthur*, had already recorded the famous exploits of [King Arthur](#) and the [Knights of the Round Table](#).

According to the former book, after King Arthur had united the entire island of Britain, he clashed against the tyrannical Roman emperor for the dominion of all Europe; several battles ensued, all of which he won, thus bringing about the fall of Rome and the emperor's defeat, upon which he seized the throne and crowned himself emperor of Europe. However, faced with the betrayal of his illegitimate son [Mordred](#), he returned to his native England and was stabbed in mortal combat — or so the story goes.

Of course this is not so much actual history as it is a tale of [romance](#), but the author, a man named [Monmouth](#), grandly professed this to be a true historical account. In creating this fictitious "history" of his, he no doubt expended a great deal of effort and toil.

I'm extremely fond of the tale written above. I love made-up stories, and I love the people who pour all their passion into creating such pointless fairy tales as well. Though not when politics gets involved and they're fabricated just to curry favor with those in power.

Because I like made-up stories, I thought I'd like to become a writer of fiction. If even after blending together not only the *Historia* mentioned above, as well as [The Three Musketeers](#), [The Man in the Iron Mask](#), [Nansou Satomi Hakkenden](#) (*Tale of Eight Dogs*), [Water Margin](#), and other such key ingredients, I have still been unable to concoct an interestingly flavored soup, it's probably because I

haven't yet realized the limits of my own skill. Having already written a historical in a futuristic setting (T/N: [Legend of the Galactic Heroes](#)), this time I wanted to set a story in a parallel universe of our own planet's past — thinking, perhaps, that this might make my life a little easier.

At any rate, though no match for the incredible passion of the great Monmouth before me, but determined to concoct a soup of my own, I set about doing my homework. [Chang An](#) in the [Tang Dynasty](#), the [Turkish Ottoman Empire](#), the [Ilkhanate](#) and the [Byzantine Empire](#) — I went through two or three rounds before finally settling on medieval Persia as my setting. Of course, not the actual medieval Persia, but a nation just like it in a parallel universe. "[Pars](#)" is a corrupted pronunciation of [Fars](#), the primary lands of the medieval Persian dynasties. (T/N: Apparently the other way around actually, despite modern pronunciation. [Old Persian = Parsa](#))

Both character names and place names were taken from the history and mythology of pre-Islamic Persia. Strictly speaking, there's a different feel between the names of ancient Persia and the names of medieval Persia, but please go easy on me with those!

What I mean by going easy is because, as you see, I've peppered this book with quite a lot of Persian terms, and have furthermore used them wherever appropriate, so serious scholars of Persian history and literature may perhaps be rather annoyed. To avoid that, I set this in a parallel universe, but please keep that point in mind beforehand. After all, this is just a fabricated story, so please do go easy on me.

Meanwhile, the enemy armies that invade Pars are based on both the [Crusaders](#) as well as the Spanish [conquistadors](#) in America; though I painted them in a garishly cruel light, it is only due to the

demands of the story. That said, if you've read books like [Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*](#), you will understand the extent of the atrocities the Crusaders did commit in the name of God. [Richard I](#), "the Lionheart," became popular in Japan through the [Robin Hood](#) legend and [Ivanhoe](#), but when he took 2700 hostages at the city of [Akka](#), he demanded 20,000 gold in ransom from the Arabs, and upon being refused, [massacred them all](#). On the other hand, the Arab general [Saladin](#), when [occupying Jerusalem](#), allowed his captives to leave safely with all their wealth and possessions. To claim the two were equally worthy rivals is perhaps a bit insulting to Saladin.

Setting aside our own world, in the world of Pars, there of course exist countless other nations; Arslan, who in the first volume has already seen his own kingdom stolen from him, his capital occupied, and both parents captured, will no doubt be passing through quite a few of them in the future. However, before that, he who has yet to mature as either a ruler or a warrior has quite a bit of growing to do. At the very least he'll need to learn how to command the four-and-a-half people who currently consider themselves his subordinates. Otherwise there will be no point to the title "Arslan Senki." (T/N: literally "War Chronicles of Arslan")

At the moment, Arslan is nothing more than a piece of luggage to his subordinates. He must grow up in a hurry, and clear all the plots set before him by his evil creator: danger, warfare, secret plots, natural disaster, death, and so on — or so I hope. And so, if my readers continue cheering on this unreliable protagonist and the various figures around him, that will be most reassuring to me, as the one cooking up this soup.